

Sandra Butler: Teaching Our Feet to Pray

From Sandra Butler's presentation at: *Awakening the Energy for Change: the Black Madonna and the Womb of God*, a conference at the Pacific School of Religion, June 18, 2005.

About Sandra Butler:

Sandra Butler is the author of Conspiracy of Silence: The Trauma of Incest, and co-author with Barbara Rosenblum of Cancer in Two Voices. Butler's writing, teaching and political organizing center on the reparative intersections of personal growth, social change and spiritual practice. Her work on the steering committee of Bay Area Women in Black blends these elements in the politics of witness, activism, theatre, ritual and prayer.

In the summer of 1991, a group of Jewish feminists, concerned about the Israeli Occupation of Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the rise of the second Palestinian intifada and its draconian response by the Israeli government and army, gathered to begin a chapter of Women in Black.

Our foundation was the powerful template of both silent witness reflecting the silencing of women's speech, and wearing black clothing as a symbol of sorrow for all victims of war that mark the now nearly 200 Women in Black chapters around the world.

Our additional kavannah (intention) was to blend street activism that incorporated music, poetry, ritual and ceremony. We wanted to design a theatrical form that would carry our message of peace and justice. One of our members, familiar with the many guises of the Black Madonna around the world, suggested that we find a way to include her in our street theatre. Our search led us to Annie Hallet, a mask and puppet maker, who was, as we later discovered, the artist who had made six puppets for China Galland, four of which were traditional Black Madonnas, one was the French St. Sarah-la-Kali, the Patron of the Gypsies and one of the Shekinah, faceless, black net, lit from the inside, as large as the Madonnas.

We began by using one of Annie's puppets at an early vigil to gauge the effect on passers-by, and were startled by the intense and positive response to her presence. We soon incorporated four, and now use eight puppets in our vigils.

In September 2001, during Rosh Hashanah, only weeks after the attacks on the World Trade Center, we gathered at the Emeryville Marina for a Tashlich ceremony, the ritual casting-off-into-moving-waters of the past year's misdeeds. The puppets were the backdrop, each standing beside a woman holding a tablet that represented the commandments we have broken in the past year.

The speaker said, "These are the Days of Awe, ten days during which Jews traditionally engage in *heshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of the soul. This is a time to arouse ourselves from sleep and decide how we will live in this coming year. We are required to challenge our complacency and lethargy and examine those behaviors, choices and acts, both of omission and commission. This is a period where we express regret for our actions and the actions of our people."

She then asked participants to write down the ways they were prepared to cast off their silent acquiescence to American's support of the Israeli policies of Occupation. The slips of paper were exchanged for pieces of bread held in straw baskets by the puppets, and as their vows were read, a cello played and hundreds of women and men solemnly moved to the water's edge to cast off their collective wrong-doings.

This first large ceremony taught us that incorporating the puppet figures as the centerpiece of our political activism brought a strong spiritual dimension to our powerful blending of prayer, participatory ceremony and a sense of re-dedication to urgent but peaceful struggle.

During Chanukah of that same year, we shaped a ritual that utilized the puppets as a menorah (an eight stemmed candelabra.) We gathered at the darkest time of the season to affirm the miracle of light, honor the darkness of the womb, the source of life, and re-dedicate ourselves to working for peace in ways that bring small sparks of illumination into our troubled and a angry world. As each speaker prepared to address the congregation, she approached the shamus, the central puppet in the menorah, lit a candle and carried it to the podium. After all eight speakers concluded, the several hundred people who crowded into the main hall of Chochmat Ha Lev, a Jewish Meditation Center, were moved to participate in approaching the puppets, lighting their own candles, and at the conclusion of the service, offering their own hopes and concrete commitments to one small act to work for peace in their homes, in their neighborhoods, in their workplaces, in their country and in the world.

The puppets with their steady unwavering presence become powerful screens upon which passers-by project their own meanings. For some, our stately procession evokes a funeral procession for all those who have died in wars around the world. For others, we seem to be a sort of religious ceremony, a sense of the presence of the Mother on the crowded city street. And when we vigil in African-American neighborhoods, the puppets mirror familiar and inspiring images of the residents of the neighborhood. One child said,

"They're how we look, just bigger and braver.

"When we choose to participate in political gatherings that will undoubtedly be contentious and adversarial, our presence creates an alternative space. When BAWIB vigils, several women are assigned to hand out one page explanations about our work and presence at that event, respond to passers-by, answer questions, talk to the media and act as our public voice. Surrounded by the bombast of exhortational speakers shouting into microphones, hate-filled banners and fliers, we arrange ourselves, just a bit away from the speakers platform, but still visible, and come to stillness, our very silence compelling people to take notice. The puppets reflect the gentle and determined work of women making peace as they hover above us, still, patient, open.

Our signs read:

Mothers are Weeping in Israel and Palestine

Mothers are still Weeping in New York and Afghanistan

Mothers are Weeping in The United States and Iraq

Jewish Women For Peace

How Many Dead Children?

End the Occupation

People are startled into a different, deeper recognition of our life-affirming and respectful opposition. Passers-by are moved, some weep, others ask to stand with us. Some approach us and whisper to the shrouded puppet faces, "Thank you for being here. Thank you for your witness. You are like an oasis in all this madness." One man moved out of the center of the crowd to stand before us for a long time. Then, stepping toward a puppet, he said,

"You have brought this old veteran to tears."

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, when challenged by members of his congregation

about why he marched with Martin Luther King across the Selma Bridge, responded, "My feet were praying."

Now, four years later, when BAWIB uses the Jewish holiday cycle, collaborates with other progressive groups, or develops our own standing or walking vigils, when we wear our puppets to protest injustice in Israel/Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, East Oakland or Washington, our feet are praying. As are our hearts. These are our small victories. And, like women all over the world, we persevere.

The power of these puppets has taught me that a poem, the reader flanked by eight black holy womens, the only sound that of a drum echoing the human heart moves and mobilizes people more deeply than even the best crafted call to righteous action. These figures embody the political and the sacred, the holiness of right action.

While we range from completely secular to women with a daily spiritual practice, each of us lives from a sense of faith that each of our actions is apart of creating a future that does not yet exist. A future of safety and of peace. Our feet are learning to pray, and we are learning that our prayers can bring down the temples of greed, violence and war.

Frequently, our concluding ritual includes the recitation of the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead. The Kaddish, traditionally chanted by those in mourning, does not mention death, but is a prayer of affirmation of life and of faith. In reciting this ancient prayer, we lament and we praise. We create a tapestry of sound and song, words and prayer, movement and tears that honor our need to mourn, as well as our faith in the possibility of peace.

There are times during our vigils with Women in Black that I wear a puppet. On those occasions, the world outside becomes muffled as I gaze through a black gauze fabric, able to see, but not visible to passers-by. I sense the traffic, people moving along the street, feel the resonance of the drum, one at the front and another at the back of the line like a steady heartbeat, and am filled with the sound of my own breath.

There is a moment in synagogue when, in preparing to wrap myself in my prayer shawl, I lift the cloth over my head in order to recite the blessing that accompanies the wearing of the tallit. Feminist theologians have augmented the traditional understandings of this prayer by adding the presence of the Shechkina, the feminine aspect of the Divine, typically depicted as a winged presence sheltering us from harm. Holding the fabric

above my head, I recite the blessing and let the tallit come to rest upon my shoulders. When I lift the puppet over my head, pause, then allow it to settle upon my shoulders I am held within a sacred enclosure, sheltered under the divine wings of the Shechina. I become aware of my footsteps, of how slowly they move. I am engaged in a walking meditation. Not only are my feet praying, I have become a prayer.

Photographs of the puppets, our one-pagers and the history of our work can be found at: <http://www.bayareawomeninblack.org>.

A Short History Of Women In Black

“Women in Black” was inspired by earlier movements of women who demonstrated on the streets, making a public space for women to be heard - particularly Black Sash, in South Africa, and the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, seeking the ‘disappeared’ in the political repression in Argentina. But WIB also shares a genealogy with groups of women explicitly refusing violence, militarism and war, such as the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom formed in 1918, and the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp in the UK and related groups around the world opposing the deployment of US missiles in the eighties.

Women in Black as we know it today began in 1988 in Israel. In 1987, 20 years after Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza, the Palestinian intifada began. In response Israeli Jewish women began to stand in weekly vigils in public places, usually at busy road junctions. Starting in Jerusalem, the number of vigils in Israel eventually grew to almost forty. In the north of Israel, where the concentration of Arab communities is greatest, Palestinian women who are Israeli citizens were also active in Women in Black groups. Many local WIB groups made contact with women across the Green Line engaged in support work, e.g. visiting Palestinians in Israeli prisons.

At WIB vigils, women carried placards saying “End the Occupation” and closely related messages. The focus was quite precise, in order to be able to draw in a wide group of women. The vigils were predictable: same site, regular intervals. The women wore black. They were seen by, and provoked reactions from, many passers-by on foot and in vehicles, some of whom heckled and abused them, both in sexualized terms (‘whores’) and for their politics (‘traitors’). Their policy was not to shout back but to maintain silence and dignity.

Soon after, when Yugoslavia began to disintegrate and war broke out between the former Yugoslav republics, some of the Italian women visited feminist activists in Belgrade, which led to a similar form of organization and action there. Women in Black in Belgrade (Zene u Crnom) was formed on October 9 1991. Explicitly feminist, they have been actively opposing nationalist aggression and masculine violence ever since.

Zene u Crnom had a strong and challenging street presence, with regular weekly vigils in Republic Square in Belgrade from 1991. They work in partnership with men refusing to serve in the military, and have maintained an extensive programme involving public statements, writing and publishing, educational workshops and seminars, and organizing international visits and meetings.

A Spanish WIB network, Mujeres de Negro, were by now strong and active. They helped find refuge, respite and a public platform in Spain for women from the Yugoslav region. It was with an important input from Mujeres de Negro and Donne in Nero that the women of Zene u Crnom in Belgrade organized a series of ten annual international encounters at different locations in the former Yugoslavia, which have been an important force creating and expanding the international network.

During the sequence of wars that began in 1992, in Croatia and Bosnia., Women in Black groups sprang up in many more countries, supporting Zene u Crnom Belgrade in their opposition to nationalist aggression. Women got together in Belgium (a French-speaking group Femmes en Noir in Brussels and Flemish-speaking group Vrouwen in het Zwart in Leuven). Women in Black London took its name at this time, starting to hold weekly or monthly vigils in Trafalgar Square, in central London.

Women in Black locally and internationally have received a number of awards in recognition of their work for peace. The worldwide network were awarded the Millennium Women's Peace Prize sponsored by the NGO International Alert and the UN agency UNIFEM, and the following year the network was a nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize. Donne in Nero were awarded the Gold Dove of Peace, an Italian prize, in 2002. The Network was honoured by Church Women United, USA.

Israeli Women in Black won the Aachen Peace Prize (1991); the peace award of the city of San Giovanni d'Asso in Italy (1994); and the Jewish Peace Fellowship's "Peacemaker Award" (2001).