

Woman in Black by Juliet Eastland

MY 85-YEAR-OLD AUNT JUDY BLANC has led an interesting life. But while she'll gladly expound on Women in Black, the noted peace-activism group she co-founded, she's pathologically averse to gabbing about herself – a trained anthropologist, she'd rather discuss *you* – so others have to chime in. Her colleagues, for example, praise her astute research. My mother recounts how her sister danced with African-dance pioneer Pearl Primus in New York City, and how, as a young communist, she worked briefly as a low-level spy, gathering intelligence on a trial.

Friends, now elderly, sigh that they'd *still* marry her. But she met fellow adventurer Haim Blanc, a Romanian-born linguistics student, in college. After graduation, Haim enlisted for Israel in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. "He knew European Jews after World War II couldn't go back," she says, even as he supported establishing one Jewish-Arab nation. Judy, who then spoke no Hebrew, visited him in Israel in 1954 and never left, even after Haim's death in 1984.

And now here she is, an immigrant whose decades of work in western (Jewish) and eastern (Palestinian) Jerusalem have entwined her with the city. And here I am, finally interviewing her about her life's work.

Is there *anyone* with whom my aunt has not broken pita bread? My memories of childhood visits are saturated in steam – lush vapours emanating from the backroom kitchen of a West Bank Palestinian family; the acrid, leafy scent of tea brewed by a Jewish poet; the pungency of black coffee, served to a Bedouin scholar in a preposterously tiny china cup. My aunt seemed to be everywhere, know everyone.

So in 1988, after the first intifada erupted, she acted. "Israeli occupation [of Palestinian territories] was neither moral nor politically wise," she asserts. In an era of virtually non-existent feminist protest, she and several others organized a peace-and-justice vigil. They called themselves Women in Black.

Not everyone approved. "Jerusalem has a violent, right-wing religious crowd," Judy says. In the second week of the protest, Meir Kahane's ultranationalist "thugs" attacked, punching women and tearing signs. "Thank goodness, we were the Old Left and gave battle. We held on, and sort of punched back." Not bad for a 60-year-old grandmother.

Weekly vigils coalesced, and by International Women's Day Aunt Judy estimates 500 women were standing silently, holding signs, in Jerusalem's Paris Square. Solidarity vigils arose in Israel and internationally, and soon black-clad women abroad were protesting militarism in their own nations. Women in Black's website explains, "feminist actions dressed in black convert women's traditional passive mourning for the dead in war into a powerful refusal of the logic of war." Overall, women "have something unique to say about war":

"Male violence against women in domestic life and in the community, in times of peace and in times of war, are interrelated ... Women-only peace activism does not suggest that women, any more than men, are 'natural-born peacemakers.' But women often inhabit different cultures from men, and are disproportionately involved in caring work. We know what justice and oppression mean, because we experience them as women. Most women have a different experience of war from that of most men."

The message resonates, no matter women's backgrounds. Initially, few cited feminism as an impetus to protest. Rather, they felt a bond with women, both Israeli and Palestinian. "Wearing black meant mourning for broken lives, public and private, without all the theory," says Judy.

Twenty-five years later, Women in Black identifies as "not an organisation, but a means of communicating and a formula for action." It has neither constitution, manifesto, nor dues: "Any group of women anywhere in the world at any time may organize a vigil against any manifestation of violence, militarism or war." Feminists have "progressed to talking to, standing with, men," notes Judy, resulting in growing male participation. Currently, Women in Black protesters stand in 18 countries, including Canada and the U.S.

"We're just a vigil," Judy says. "We don't do outreach, we don't take on other issues. We

have one message, and those who want to be more active find other groups." This single-mindedness has garnered Women in Black international acclaim, including a 2001 Nobel Peace Prize nomination for the Serbian and Israeli/Palestinian groups. The latter "has insisted on dialogue and reconciliation" for years, noted the nominators. This "vision of peace which comprises non-discrimination, anti-sexism and anti-racism" could, and should, go global.

The challenge now in Israel is resuscitating the concept of "occupation" itself. People are weary of the word, and with few exceptions, Judy laments, "the young generation doesn't see the occupation as an outrage ... I suppose we must keep it 'on the radar' until we think how to [raise] people's consciousness. Would shutting up help?"

A rhetorical question, since when it comes to conscience, my aunt has never shut up in her life. In one of the most militarized, historically intractable areas in the world, she shows up weekly, year after year, to register moral outrage and demand peace. That she does so mutely makes her delivery more powerful, as it leaves room for response, for dialogue. Shut up? Her silence speaks loudest of all.

Juliet Eastland is a writer in Boston, Massachusetts. Her favourite way to cultivate inner peace is to sit under, climb on or just be near trees.

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For the love of justice *by Lydia Wylie-Kellermann*

Seven sacred works for young activists (like me)

Know your history

Walk it. Breathe it. Build deep relationships with the elders in your circles. Listen to their stories. Let the listening and retelling become resistance. Remember your ancestors. Say their names out loud and often. Give thanks that you are not alone. You are not creating this movement out of nothing. It's been done over and over again. Know it. Honour it. Your work is simply to offer new gifts to old work.

Place matters

Ground yourself somewhere. Get your hands in the dirt. Plant asparagus and fruit trees. Put down roots. Let the land tell you her story. Weave together the struggle and history of the people and land on which you stand. Know your neighbours. Create local economy. Be present to the here and now while working for the future. Build community. Build community. Build community.

Honour your anger

Undo the learning that anger is bad. Read the news and accept your desire to scream. Look around you – weep. Feel it. Express it. Move it into your feet and hands and voice. Let your anger at injustice drive you toward the love and urgency of justice.

Understand your privilege

Acknowledge and leave behind feelings of arrogance and entitlement – the curses of this generation. Know your privilege. Be mindful of it in every meeting, in every action, in every community. Work against it. Surrender it when you can. Surround yourself with people who don't look or think or act like you. Let others take the lead. Stand in solidarity. Listen always. Learn stories by heart. Don't be reduced to your privileges or oppressions. Don't label one another – know one another. Be people first. Remember Martin Luther King Jr.'s triplet of evil – racism, militarism and materialism. The struggles against these three are all the same struggle.

Nourish your spirit

Read the sacred and ancient texts of communities from long ago. Dance in the rain. Climb trees. Wonder at the stars. Laugh till your stomach hurts. Be still and silent. Honour the darkness. Let voices be raised in harmony. Nourish your spirit alone. Nourish it in community. Taste your tears. Feel joy in your gut. Live deeply. Celebrate resurrection in its many forms.

Refuse to give up

Fight with everything you've got. Stand at this critical historic moment. Injustice is coming from every direction. Let go of the obsession with perfection or results. Do what feels right in your bones and don't worry about what will be most effective. Take serious risks. What are you willing to die for? Put your body somewhere ... anywhere. Find hope even when there is no logic.

Give gratitude

In everything, give thanks. Thanks be for those who have gone before, who have sung the songs, who have given their lives. For the cloud of witnesses who watch over you now and who prayed for you before you born. Offer gratitude that you are not alone in this struggle. There are many resisting and creating in infinite ways and in every direction. Give thanks for this beautiful earth that gives you life, feeds your spirit and holds a history and a future beyond you. And give thanks that although "the arc is long, it bends towards justice." We see it and know that it is so.

Lydia Wylie-Kellermann lives in Detroit, Michigan with her partner Erinn and baby Isaac. She is part of the Jeanie Wylie Community, focused on urban agriculture, immigrant justice and nonviolence. She works for Word and World – an experiment in alternative theological education bridging the seminary, the sanctuary and the street. She finds hope as she watches her 4-month-old son learn to laugh. "My love for him forces hope into my bones and drives me to work for a peaceful world for him and all children."