

A Circle

Alice Walker

A bout of flu prevented Alice Walker taking her place on the jury for the London Session of the Russell Tribunal on Palestine. As she recovered, the celebrated author of The Color Purple and numerous other works set down her thoughts on the Tribunal.

Nothing is stronger than a circle which is why, as Black Elk teaches us, everything tries to be round.

In many of my talks to young people, to women, to peace activists, etc., I advocate that in these times of planetary disasters and instability people everywhere should gather together in circles of friends, in each other's homes, on a regular basis, to talk through the fears and challenges with which we, as a world, are faced: more frightening events at this time than at any period in human history. It is time to circle, I advise, with the hope that eventually our diverse circles will engage each other, merge, and organically transform the earth.

I think of the Russell Tribunal as one of these circles, perhaps the most important, though its members may consider themselves strangers to each other. That they are not strangers is evident by their appearance, as a group, to take on the Tribunal's exacting and highly essential work: to cast the light of conscience on the behaviours of powerful interests and destructive players in the world community. This is a duty that calls out to those who understand how important it is to end our common silence about abuse and atrocities committed in our names, and who also realize that we must be determined in our efforts to care for the maligned and traumatized and oppressed of the earth. That this caring signifies our awareness of membership in the same clan, the same family. The family of humankind of which any oppressed person is the brother or sister, the mother or father, the child or grandparent that is, at one point or another of our lives also our own self.

It has been an honour to be invited to join the present session as part of a jury hearing testimony on international corporate complicity in the destruction of the Palestinian people, who, since I visited Gaza a year and a half ago, have become part of the earth's peoples to whom I have felt duty bound to show up for. What has happened to them has happened to countless others. Including my own tribes: African, Native American, poor European immigrant. It is because I recognize the brutality with which my own multi-branched ancestors have been treated that I can identify the despicable, lawless, cruel and sadistic behaviour that has characterized Israel's attempts to erase a people, the Palestinians, from their own land. For isn't this what the US military was ordered to do to the 'Indians' of America? Did not the British burn out communities of Scots and horrifically oppress the Irish? Did not wealthy and powerful Whites, generally, for a time, rape, kill, capture, and/or enslave Africans? And are not some of their descendants, at this very moment, stealing and confiscating African and Indian and poor white land, and harming people, using many of their ancestors' ancient tools of brute force and deceit?

It grieves me that I am unable to be in this circle of brave and compassionate people on this occasion because of a mundane yet tenacious visitor: the flu. Which condition, as I recover, I can almost consider absurd. Since college I have admired Bertrand Russell, the founder of the Tribunal, and also Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone De Beauvoir, early members. James Baldwin, as well, a person of such laser like intelligence and moral integrity, that it would have been a joy to sit in his symbolic chair. But the Tribunal will go on: because it is a living part of all of us. That part that knows what is right. That part that really does not appreciate wrong. That part that is not blind. Not deaf. The part that hears the cries of others in distress because those cries echo our own internal expressions of shame, horror, dejection and despair.

The Russell Tribunal is rare and precious and glorious, because it reminds us to act for ourselves, to follow our own conscience. To join with our fellow humans who are also awake. Or at least beginning to stretch and yawn. It is a treasure that makes the world not only more safe, but infinitely richer. I bow to its belief in justice, fairness, international standards of decency and law. The ability of humans to acknowledge and defend what is right and to do the work of holding the light in a world that seems at times to be sliding inexorably into the darkness. All that is ever needed to challenge that darkness is one light. May each of us, following the Tribunal's example, be that light, however small and flickering, wherever we find ourselves.