

A Report from the Trenches

Ann Bradney

I *f you have come to help me, you are wasting your time.
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine,
then let us walk together...*

—Lila Watson

Australian Aboriginal Woman

This is a report from the trenches.

I am going to start with the journey of *Radical Aliveness*, and then bring in the work we are now doing in Israel and Palestine with *Together Beyond Words*.

The birth and evolution of Radical Aliveness

Radical Aliveness was born 22 years ago. I left the Institute of Core Energetics, where I had studied and been on the faculty, to answer a calling from my spirit to create a way of working in a group setting that would use the powerful tools I had learned. I wanted to work relationally rather than focus on the individual. I wanted to develop a process that would honor the wisdom that emerges from the fluidity of a group that's discovering and evolving and experiencing itself – a process that would necessarily include working with systemic issues, which are crucial to who we are.

We are not separate from the world; we are part of it. We are shaped by the systems (religion, socio-economic origins, family, tribe, gender, ethnicity, language, etc.) we are born into. And for every systemic influence, there is healing for us to do. We are in this together, and this is true in every country in the world, in every group I have ever worked with.

I am a process person, I am an experimenter. I am in the field using a laboratory method to develop, invite, collaborate, research, and learn.

I was very interested in how to create a working space where all perspectives, all ways of expression, and all voices would be welcome. And I saw that I could use our differences as a medium itself, a tool to pry open self-awareness, feelings, and knowing each other more deeply.

Importantly, I wanted all the voices and energy and perspectives to lead groups to where we needed to go, rather than being bound by a theory from the outside that would impose a preconceived agenda of what healing means. From my perspective, there is not one way, one leader, one model that can get us to a new story in this world. When we engage in this kind of process, we are all required to be both leaders and participants.

It has been an illuminating, challenging, powerful, life-changing, awareness-growing time.

The Radical Aliveness Institute was a place of experimentation, chaos, intensity, and creation. There were plenty of failures and mistakes, and there was also a sense of joy and excitement for many who had never found a forum where they were able to bring everything they wanted to bring without being told where to go, what they should feel, or what healing for them was.

As the years went on, voices and perspectives spoke loudly to me. “You say you welcome everything, but I am not feeling welcome here.” I listened. It required my being willing to be changed, being willing to find a frame that would be expansive enough to invite in everything that wanted to come, and also have enough structure that people were supported to grow, transform, and become more aware. It required me to learn deeply about my own assumptions, perceptual filter, and worldview. It required me to enter into the unknown. It required, as a leader, being willing to be challenged over and over again, and to learn from these challenges. The more I learned, the less I knew for certain. And this was an invigorating process for me personally, because it mirrored the flux and uncertainty I invited my group participants to embrace. I became more interested in having people from thoroughly different perspectives in the room together.

My belief then and now is that this is the way forward. Differences. When people of wildly divergent backgrounds are thrust together in a learning forum, intense emotions and interactions happen organically. As the “leader,” it is my job to conduct the energy of groups, not suppress or control it, and to harness the surprising gifts this unleashed energy always yields.

I was profoundly blessed to meet an incredible woman (who asks to remain unnamed) who saw my vision and the spirit of what I was doing, but also saw what was missing. I spent six years working with her in Nairobi, Kenya, with diverse groups comprising people from different tribes, different countries, and different positions in the societies in which they lived. There were over a dozen languages. We developed a way to learn about each of our own perceptual filters and frames. We used the differences and conflicts among these participants to recognize ways we had been socialized to perceive the world. We read, we did organic research (a qualitative research method), we processed. The more we learned to see our own filters, the more curious and open we could be to what was in front of us. Tools and techniques were examined to see who created them and the implicit assumptions they held – assumptions about bodies and feelings and healing. What worldview were these coming from? We studied individualism and collectivism and the spectrum of what a self is from these different worldviews. We studied power on personal, interpersonal, and systemic levels. We looked at who a socialized human being is. We made space for the deep feelings that are often at the base of our intense misunderstandings and conflicts in the world. We worked with values and value judgments. And of course, we worked with feelings, sensations, and emotions.

At this time, Radical Aliveness moved from being an expert model (one in which we have a clear frame with tools and techniques that we use universally with everyone and which has an agenda of where we need to go) to a non-expert/expert model. A non-expert model means to me that I have a lot of knowledge and tools and techniques, but I use them flexibly and with creativity in service of “What is healing for you?” and with an awareness that I have my own perceptual filter, and I need to be open to what is true for you, what your body needs, how feelings are expressed in you, even what words mean. You are the expert on yourself.

The familiar ground each of us stands on as a leader is pulled out from under us. And it’s both scary and exhilarating.

During this period, I developed the principles of Radical Aliveness as a foundation for the work we do:

- Knowing I don't know
- Being willing to be changed by our encounters
- Saying yes to everything within us with an intention toward consciousness (including our no!)
- Cultivating a non-shaming heart and attitude (toward ourselves and others)
- Honoring multiple perspectives
- Doing no harm (knowing we WILL do harm, but we will stay to the best of our ability when we are confronted with the harm we have done)

And we added one more after working in Israel:

- DO YOUR PART

This work is not about self-transformation alone. It is about being part of the world and connected to the world, so we always accentuate that we are change agents who need to bring this difficult and important work back out into our families, communities, the world.

We also use guidelines to support the work. These include self-focus (with the understanding that the self and how it develops and what it means varies culturally). Self-focus allows us to slow down the moments when the process gets very hot, and to check in around intention and impact. What is your intention right now? What is your impact? We have to be willing to know we all have impact on others, and to really hear it to the best of our ability when we are being told what our impact is. We work with curiosity as a foundational value. We also have a value of staying through difficult interactions, though of course there are times when it is right for people to leave. We embrace discomfort as part of the process. We work with complexity – seeing the ways in which each of us is not a single story.

Something that has been foundational to our work is the understanding that we all have work to do. The healing for a person in a mostly normative position is different from the healing for someone in a marginalized position (with the understanding again that we are not a single story, and that normative and non-normative live in all of us).

All of us need support to see, feel, and change so we can live together in new ways. The quote at the beginning of the article is perfectly aligned with our philosophy. Our liberation is tied together. The dynamics of social stratification – better than/less than – occur all over the world. It is only the jackets that change. We hold space in *Radical Aliveness* for everyone. Being in relationship with differences is at the heart of one's willingness to change. When we can hold a space where there is enough understanding of complexity and socialization, where we move beyond categories and labels that stop the conversation, opportunity arises for the deeper feelings and stories to be shared in every direction. When the space becomes more complex, we are also able to ask, "Where do I do to others what is being done to me?"

This is not easy work, and I don't mean to imply that we skip over the harsh realities of the world and what people are experiencing. In fact, there is something about this process that allows for all this information to emerge, to be integrated. The polarization that seems to be a hallmark of our interactions these days actually has pathways here to move somewhere deeper. It requires the willingness to be with intense feelings and awareness. It requires an ability to ultimately support people in mostly normative positions to feel cognitive dissonance (as opposed to feelings of guilt or "I am here to help you"). At the

same time, people who are having experiences of marginalization and being non-normative in society need support to find their sovereignty, rather than staying in the dynamic of reaction to the normative frame.

My experience is that people are hungry to have a space like this. It brings hope, it brings relief, and it brings the opportunity for something different from what people are used to. It invites a kind of leadership in the room. When there is not a leader with “the way” telling people what to do, people step up and bring their wisdom. Those many perspectives and voices take us far beyond where we would go with a single leader.

Radical Aliveness developed three hard and fast rules – our only rules: don’t hurt yourself physically, don’t hurt another physically (though feelings WILL get hurt) and don’t hurt the room. Everything else is welcome.

This supports a process that becomes very organic. We hold a space for mystery to guide us – never knowing what will emerge. Life leads the way. It requires standing in a profound “not knowing” and being comfortable with chaos. It requires trust that human beings have lived a life before they met us, and come to us with wisdom, ways they have learned to survive with dignity and power. It helps us know deeply that we are not broken, that there is nothing to fix.

Because the group process welcomes all expression and energy and the willingness to allow chaos, many powerful feelings, judgments, and beliefs emerge that might normally remain underground in a more controlled atmosphere. We welcome that. There is nothing that comes out of us that is not part of being a socialized human. Once in the open and received in non-shaming ways, we have an opportunity to see things we have been afraid to see. We have an opportunity to understand where these attitudes, beliefs, and feelings come from. Faced with more information, we have the space to “heal,” and many times to change our hearts and minds.

Of course, Radical Aliveness is not for everyone. There are people for whom this way of working is not helpful, so we work hard to make sure that people understand what they are walking into. However, as intense as this work is, there is a sense of safety and trust, and profound relief that there is a place where all these feelings can be held and allowed. Our goal has been to support human beings to navigate life from the here and now and with CHOICE.

This brings me to the work we are doing in Israel and Palestine today.

Applying the work in Israel and Palestine

In 2006 I was at the Esalen Institute to lead a workshop. At the cocktail party for workshop leaders, I met an amazing woman from Israel talking about the work she did with Jews and Palestinians. Her name was Nitsan Joy Gordon. She had been doing this work for many years, and when she spoke, I was called. I had been developing *Radical Aliveness* for four years at that time. A powerful voice told me to tell her I wanted to work with her.

Nancy Lunney Wheeler, the head of programming, invited her to bring a group of Palestinians and Jews to Esalen the following year. When Nitsan asked whom she should work with from the leaders who worked at Esalen, Nancy, in her incredible intuition, suggested me.

Nitsan and I met in 2007 to work together for the first time. I had no idea what I was doing, and I knew that what these women had experienced was something that I had never experienced. What I did know was that I was not afraid of powerful feelings or conflict. The women had been with other leaders before me at Esalen who were wonderful, but

the full force of their rage, grief, and fear had not been allowed to emerge. By the time I arrived they were ready to explode – and they did! It was the beginning of a long and beautiful collaboration between me, Nitsan, and our Palestinian partner Silvia Margeyah.

Together Beyond Words is the organization Nitsan runs. She had found ways to bring Jewish (Ashkenazi and Sephardic) and Palestinian (Christian, Bedouin, Druze, and Muslim) women together through dance, touch, and listening partnerships for the past number of years. Our work was a perfect fit. In the years since then we have grown and developed together, influencing each other's work with this population. By 2014 we started including men in the groups. We worked together at Esalen a number of times, at the Omega Institute, and in Israel and Palestine. During this time, we experimented, grew, and worked with many people.

Three years into the work in Nairobi, I stopped my collaboration with *Together Beyond Words* because as I was learning more, I became aware that as much as people loved the work, I didn't know enough to be doing it responsibly and without imposing my filter on their bodies, spirits, and beings. I needed more information and awareness. After I had been in Nairobi for six years, I felt informed enough to return.

Since that time our work has matured and spread in Israel/Palestine. Right now, we are doing a two and a half-year *Radical Aliveness training* program for leadership, training



Left to right: Ann Bradney, Silvia Margeyah, Nitsan Joy Gordon

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Palestinians and Jews in this way of working. We use three languages – Arabic, Hebrew, and English. We translate everything because language is a conduit for power. We also do workshops for people in Israel and the West Bank. Many times, people are in the room with others they have only heard about through the media, sometimes harboring a historic hatred or fear. This process allows us to move beyond the categories and simple stories people have about each other, and invite the complexity that exists in each of us. It does not lead to a cozy “we are all the same” place, but instead to a mature place that asks us to listen to different perspectives, come to deeper understanding of each other, and often to a feeling that even with our differences, we are connected and need each other for our very survival. Rage and tears flow, hearts open, people walk out changed. This is the goal.

Pain that is not transformed is transmitted

Radical Aliveness and Together Beyond Words are doing powerful, bold, outside-the-box work that we don’t believe anyone else is doing with these challenging and motivated populations. We are not afraid to engage the deep feelings and chaos that have led to generational patterns of violence. We believe pain that is not transformed is transmitted, and have been creating safe havens where participants learn to transform their inner pain related to the conflict into understanding and empathy toward the “other.” We are three women – an American, Ann Bradney; a Palestinian Israeli, Silvia Margeyah; and an Israeli Jew, Nitsan Joy Gordon.

Finally, I leave you with two voices and reflections, one Palestinian from the West Bank, and one Jewish, from our last training module. As rockets fell outside and sirens sounded, this committed group stayed and did the work of “heart justice.”

As a Palestinian born under occupation, and living in Ramallah under Israeli military rule, “apartheid,” I was subjected to many violent situations, which I carried in my heart. That is until I got to know the group (Radical Aliveness), and worked with them for a full week – Arabs and Jews, women and men, hand in hand, supporting each other to overcome crisis. We are not distinguished by religion or nationality; we support each other and preserve our humanity. I didn’t imagine that it was possible to change to this extent. I now see the world from another perspective; this gathering and these people, they are the only ones who gave me hope in life.

—S., Palestinian, West Bank



Want a surreal experience? Here you go.

While outside there is war, and rockets are falling on both sides, a group of Israelis and Palestinians spend a whole week together – and agreed to meet whatever comes up. Could you imagine that?

It's not such a beautiful and polite meeting. It's a stormy, noisy meeting full of everything. And when the news about the rockets begins to filter in, during the middle of the week, we sit in pairs, back-to-back, and just support one another. Leaning on each other. Physically. Emotionally. Mentally.

Oh my god, how much pain is there.

And pain is pain. No matter who's it is.

Is that not clear?

And we agree to stay. And deal with all that comes up.

Because if we don't succeed, with all the love we have between us, what chance do we have at living here together?

And if we are able to create a safe space for the feelings, then solving the problem of borders is really a small task. Because the solution isn't that complicated, even if we don't know what it is yet.

The history of our Earth is full of conflicts that raged for years, conflicts that people believed would never end. Then at some point, the conditions matured and peace broke out.

This weekend I am thankful for the insight I received into what the world could look like when people choose to feel what is theirs to feel, rather than act it out, fight, or flee.

We have endless opportunities to practice this in our everyday lives. Shall we give it a try?

—H., Israeli Jew

Let us walk together.



Ann Bradney founded and directed the Radical Aliveness Institute, a four-year professional program based in Los Angeles, from 2008 until 2021. In the 1990s, she studied under Core Energetics pioneer John Pierrakos, and served on the faculty at the Core Energetics Institute in New York until 2002. She co-directed the International Radical Aliveness Practitioner Program based in Nairobi, Kenya, for six years, and now leads a two and a half-year Radical Aliveness Peace Leadership Program for Jews and Palestinians in Israel and Palestine. Ann developed the original concepts and practices of Radical Aliveness over the past 20 years. Her innovative approach to working with individuals and groups expands beyond the realm of psychology and personal issues to address community healing and systemic issues, with the goal of creating a more just world.

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