

Testimony of Equality – our shared humanity

September 2025

Lindsay Fielder Cook in conversation with Serena, AFSC staff in Gaza.

I'm writing this to you while starving.

She writes to me from Gaza. A young woman, intelligent, early professional, recently engaged to her love. Her name is Serena.

Good morning dear Lindsey, i can barely move and walk today, it has been 5 days and i am only eating soup, nothing else. So my body is not helping me anymore.'

She hoped to join the QUNO summer school in 2024, but she could not get out. No one could get out; 2+ million people trapped behind a seven-meter-high fence with barbed wire, military posts with sharpshooters and remote-control machine guns. A fence that trapped them under more bombs dropped by Israel than were dropped on London, Dresden and Hamburg combined during World War 2. And that statistic is a year old.

Our bodies and the pain have become inseparable, and sickness remains an unrelenting part of daily life. With no medicine and no functioning hospitals, illness is ever-present, pressing on us without relief.

Instead, she spoke virtually to the students gathered in Geneva. She spoke of her life, of her humanitarian work for the American Friends Service Committee, her childhood home now destroyed, her longing for life. A number of students began crying – this was no theory, this was real, a reminder of why Quakers work to uphold human rights, peace and justice.

My body is vanishing. I can feel it weakening every day. At this point, no one talks about the bombs anymore, or the new invasion plan; we're too busy thinking about food. As for me, I no longer care about the bombs. I just want to eat. And that has become the most common wish among everyone in Gaza.

After summer school, Serena and I began writing. I knew her homeland. I first came in 1987, sponsored by Friends United Meeting, to teach at the Friends Schools in Ramallah. I was shot by the Israeli Defence Force. I returned twice with the United Nations, in refugee protection in the West Bank, and with the Oslo Peace Agreement work in Gaza. While in Gaza, an Israeli Jew assassinated the Israeli Prime Minister; soon after Benjamin Netanyahu came into power, and our peace work suffered.

When I first arrived, I could not believe what I was seeing. One group of people with citizenship and legal protection, another openly and legally oppressed, an apartheid defined

by religion, a systemic crushing of human rights and international law evolving from the ashes of WW2, yet enabled internationally for decades.

My parents go to work every day, and I spend the entire day praying they return home safely. It's incredibly hard on them. I see how tired and weak their bodies have become, and I feel helpless.

I knew what went on there. Yet even I could not imagine the depth to which Israel would crush international law and criticism, to which Western governments would harm their citizens for expressing concern, to which 'never again' genocide would be met with widespread silence.

In May, I attended Yearly Meeting Gathering in London. I found it a nurturing and intense time of worship, bravely facing intense challenges. I heard ministry on peace, simplicity, truth and sustainability. Yet as the hours passed, I longed for ministry on equality. Where was this Testimony that made us Quakers so radical from the start that we were imprisoned regularly? Is our current witness connecting equality with sustaining peace sufficiently expressed?

One of the hardest things I've witnessed during this genocide is people risking their lives just to get food, and then being shot by Israel. The massacre of starving people in food lines has shattered me. Children holding bags of flour were killed. Since then, I cannot eat bread or anything made with flour without tasting blood. Everything feels red.

The still small voice is growing in me – can we raise up our testimony of equality as critical to sustaining peace, upholding the integrity and dignity of all, seeing equal human rights as essential to peace? Inequality feeds conflict in our communities and drives dehumanization. Dehumanisation can lead, as we see in Israel, to a society viewing decades of apartheid, and now genocide, as acceptable.

I just hope to live to see the day when I am no longer losing anything, I've already lost more than enough. I truly hope that, by some miracle, next year we'll be talking about freedom, and not survival. And may the world never go silent until Gaza is alive again. With love and all my heart, Serena.

Her grace astounds me, a grace of deep humanity even when all around her is dying.

As this article goes to print, the Israeli Army has re-entered Gaza City with tanks and bombing, where Serena and her family are sheltering. She wrote - *We are not okay at all. My parents are torn apart, uncertain of what to do to save us. As they watch the tanks moving closer, it feels inevitable that we will soon have to face them. It breaks my heart to see them so powerless, unable to protect us or do anything to keep us alive. Sami is the one who keeps me going, to be honest. Still, I cannot stop thinking about our situation and holding on to the hope that somehow, we will make it out of here alive.*