

2007

Next Year in Jerusalem

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Repository Citation

Waldron, K. A., Brazil, J., & Labatt, L. M., Eds. (2007). Risk, Courage, and Women: Contemporary Voices in Prose and Poetry. Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press.

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Next Year in Jerusalem

Karen A. Waldron

I have never been so hated and terrified in all my life. As I walked alone into the Baghdad conference center, six enraged women approached me, one with her fist raised, others with voices shouting unfamiliar languages. A striking, dark-skinned woman grabbed my sleeve and yanked me close to her face.

“Our country is poor, our people starve, and you look away,” she hissed. Another pushed her aside. “Your Hollywood is more important than our children’s lives!” A third, “You are not welcome here. Why did you come?” Obviously, she and I had the same thought.

It was August, 1989, the year before the first Persian Gulf War and American bombing of Baghdad. All visions of a fascinating, exotic trip to Iraq banished, I would have given anything to be in class with my students, home drinking tea, or even having a root canal.

Thoughts of escape vanished as I was abruptly shoved by a North Vietnamese reporter. “Murderer! Butcher! You have nothing to say that we want to hear!” Hiba, the Iraqi woman assigned as my “interpreter” pushed the reporter aside, and firmly holding my arm, moved me down the aisle of the modern, cavernous auditorium to a front row of tables. She seated me behind a card with my name and “United States” written in Arabic and English.

As much to escape the tirade of loud voices following me as fascinated by the simultaneous instructions in seven languages, I put on the headphones and studied the speakers’

tables. Wiser than I, another American arrived through a side door and slid in next to me with a weak smile and wave at the annoyed-looking interpreter.

Hand outstretched, “Susan Bolton, Columbia University. I’m filling in for a colleague in Arab Studies who couldn’t come at the last minute. But I’m not a speaker and will try to leave sooner if it gets too unsafe. Are you as petrified as I am?”

“Absolutely! I’m Karen Waldron, Trinity University, San Antonio. I’ll be speaking the last day of the conference. Hopefully, things will settle down by then.”

She observed, “There are two more American women attending, one who’ll be presenting, and another, working in Paris for the State Department, who’ll be here in a few days just to keep an eye on things.” I already knew what that meant.

“Have you noticed that our ‘interpreter’ doesn’t speak much English but never lets us out-of-sight?” I asked. “She’s in several pictures with Saddam in the lobby. You know the Americans are the only ones staying at the Al Rasheed hotel?”

“Right,” she exhaled. “Who invited you to speak?”

Ironically, I was a guest of the Iraqi government. The phone call had come suddenly at home, during the chaos and pizza of my son’s fourteenth birthday party.

“Dr. Waldron?”

“Yes.”

“I am calling from the Iraqi Embassy. The Council on U.S.-Arab Relations here in Washington gave us your name as a potential speaker at the Conference of the General Federation of Iraqi Women next month. We would like you to speak on issues around providing quality care for children world-wide.”

As I motioned for my son to finish serving his friends, flashes of my visit earlier that year to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain immediately piqued my interest in this new adventure. The Council had sponsored a fascinating tour for a dozen college professors to further our understanding of the Arab world. Yet, as we travelled from Jeddah to Riyadh to Dhahran, I was sure that I had disappointed their expectations by openly questioning the Saudi leadership about their harsh treatment of women. So I was very surprised when the Council recommended me for another foray into the Middle East.

He continued, "The conference will include approximately 1000 women from around the world. While most will be from Arab countries, predominantly Iraq and Egypt, others will come from North Vietnam, Lebanon, and as far away as Brazil and Finland. You will be one of two American speakers during the week. At the end of the conference, you will be our guest for tours of Basra and other areas along the Arab River."

As he waited, my mind moved quickly. It had not been a typical day. That morning, I had received a call from former neighbors in New York that my mother had suffered a small stroke. I would have to visit her immediately and arrange for her care. Always an independent woman, she would certainly resist, initiating a new and heartbreaking chapter in our lives.

I related to Susan other events of that day. At my sons' encouragement, during the party I visited with two brilliant Taiwanese brothers who desperately needed an American sponsor. With unclear visa status, they would otherwise return home to military duty and lost opportunities for future education. As I told my story in that Iraqi auditorium, I couldn't realize that just months later, these teenagers would become a permanent part of our family, kindred brothers to my sons, and eventually, American citizens and Ph.D. engineers, one with an additional degree in law. Nor could I have known that I would come to love them as my own,

welcoming thoughtful daughters-in-law and becoming *Ama* ("Grandma") to their beautiful children.

Also, single parents don't make quick decisions on the telephone. I would be gone almost two weeks and would have to arrange care for my sons and organize the start of their school year. But that hot Texas afternoon, I was startled when the Iraqi caller interrupted my thoughts. "We need to know *today* so we can begin to process your visa."

Later that day, with arrangements made and sons supportive of my venture, I heard myself say, "I'll be honored to speak," followed by a deep personal sigh acknowledging my craziness.

And now I was in Baghdad, again questioning my safety and sanity amidst the fury of women who just wanted my blood. *Why?* What had I done, what had the U.S. done, to provoke such anger? I learned over the next days, that often their rage was over what we *hadn't* done. The Brazilian woman who confronted me at the door announced heatedly that the U.S. could save her country's economy from bankruptcy, but we didn't care. The Palestinian delegate had lost a child who could have survived with treatments of basic antibiotics. She reminded me at every turn, "We are a homeless people. Why do you support rich Zionists and ignore our poverty?"

Hearing that I was from Texas, more anger was directed at me than the other Americans. I appreciated their response, having recently seen re-runs of translations of the TV show "Dallas," even in censored Saudi Arabia. The wealth and degradation of the Ewing family had become the benchmark for gauging Americans. I felt like Sue-Ellen in their eyes.

That day, I understood easily that a native Texan who was also U.S. President would be one of the most despised men in this region of the world. But I'm not sure what my emotions

would have been had I also known that years later my own son would become an Army officer and risk his life on Iraqi soil. In the midst of such pervasive hatred, it was far better that only time brings such after-knowledge.

After the morning's ironically-entitled "Welcoming Session," Susan and I headed for lunch with the interpreter in tow. Seated by ourselves, we were delighted when two Bangladeshi women dressed in brightly colored *saris* asked if they could join us. The conversation that followed opened my eyes to my own naïveté about life in other countries.

In excellent English, one woman commented softly, "We look forward to your talk on care for children. At times, our situation at home seems hopeless. Our parents love their children as much as you love yours. Yet, many are starving and uneducated and it seems better to sell their children for a meager amount to help the family. Other times, children are simply kidnapped as they walk to the market or school, never to see their families again."

"Why?" I asked in disbelief.

"Primarily for their body parts. There is a huge market for organ-donors, too great to be supplied by normal death rates and availability. So our children are bought for a pittance or stolen to be killed. Their hearts or kidneys sell for a fortune to wealthy families or medical foundations that are ignorant of the source. We hear that the biggest market is the United States."

I was horrified. And I slowly had a sinking realization that the paper I planned to present was all wrong. Listening to these women dedicated to saving children's lives dwarfed my proposed priorities of lengthening daycare hours and providing more training for workers. Back home, these needs would be applauded. Here, these issues would seem trivial, even laughable, when so many lacked a home, a parent, even a daily meal or hospital bed.

Afternoon sessions over, Susan and I walked back to the hotel, passing 20-foot pictures of Saddam on almost every corner. Saddam, the soldier in uniform, sternly holding a rifle. Saddam, the kindly father, smiling as he gently held a child on his lap. Saddam, the religious leader, looking blissfully toward heaven. Street vendors plied us with watches with Saddam faces. The interpreter hung close behind, never speaking.

But she couldn't be in two places, and when she left to meet the American arriving from Paris, Susan and I decided to see Baghdad for ourselves. Earlier, while on an official tour, as we stared upward in amazement at the Hands of Victory Monument, huge arches of crossed swords made from Iraqi and Iranian guns and helmets, a cabbie had approached us quietly. He promised that he would give us a personal tour of the bazaars and watch over our safety. But only if he were paid in American dollars, clearly a black-market item. While Hiba was preoccupied, we spent a morning with him in several loud, crushed marketplaces bargaining for crafts. He was our Arabic voice, interpreting prices by a shake of his head and walking away, returning with us later to bargain some more, with vendors shouting that our low offers were an outrage and he yelling back that their prices were exorbitant. When we ultimately reached agreement, smiles and quiet friendliness returned to their demeanor.

While clearly we were recognizable as Americans and unlikely visitors, I didn't need to wear my *hijab* from Saudi Arabia. Baghdad was far more liberal, with many women un-scarved, sporting casual but modest clothes as they laughed, visited, and shopped. Those in traditional Muslim dress wore colorful silk head-scarves along with bright pant-legs or long skirts peeking out from under *abayas*. Somehow these glimpses of flair added to the women's sensual allure. While never seen evenings in outdoor cafes, daylight and the marketplace openly belonged to the women.

There was an understandable curiosity, as vendors brought crates for our seats and poured us steaming coffee. Looking around nervously, the cabbie translated their questions about America.

Furious ones: “Do the Zionists run America? Is that why the U.S. lets Palestinians die?” “Why did your husbands let you come here without them?”

Yet, more were interested in clarifying their impressions: “Is Michael Jordan really that good?” “Do U.S. women have sex with everyone?” “Are all Americans rich?” And, most often, “Why are you in Baghdad?”

We knew that we were taking a chance by travelling with the cabbie and that he could be imprisoned for taking American money. Yet, over subsequent years, that remarkable 110-degree morning, made even hotter by the Turkish coffee, returned poignantly in stunned moments as I watched bombs erupt in Baghdad. The marketplace is gone, but the sounds and pictures of the people remain recorded in my memory.

Waiting vigilantly that early afternoon, Hiba saw the cabbie leave us a few blocks from the hotel with our goods and friendly farewells. Shouting furiously and following us, she threatened in very broken English to have him found and us sent home. Since it was typically difficult for us to understand her, we feigned ignorance and rushed off to the afternoon’s solemn meetings.

Almost all the speakers elaborated the pitiful neglect of children. We saw slides of baby amputees in Lebanon and ten-year-old prostitutes in Bombay. A visceral sense of dread spread over us at grotesque pictures of circumcisions on young Northern African girls. Describing the child-kidnapping market for U.S. adoptions, the speaker stopped abruptly, stared at our table, and plaintively asked, “How can you steal our families from us?” My stomach turned.

As sessions ended that day, we met “Kay,” the newly-arrived American from the embassy in Paris. While giving us sparse information, she informed us that she was attending the conference “to keep an eye on things.” Consistently and rudely, Hiba interrupted our attempts at conversations. She heralded Kay back to an isolated hotel away from all of us. Amused at her quiet acknowledgment as a spy by everyone, Kay managed to sustain Hiba’s attention often enough for us to meet more of the conference women.

By now, anti-American sentiment had poured over into a tidal wave. Fueled by days of speakers’ animosity and perceptions of U.S. negligence and materialism, Susan and I felt the risk of our very presence increase. With Kay’s isolation, we were unsure of our alternatives. And the other U.S. conference speaker stirred the pot with a broad spoon.

As the Party Chair for a southern Congressman, her heart-felt bitterness erupted in this supportive environment. In her speech, she described an America full of racial hatred and dismissive of the disadvantaged. She told countless stories of personal persecution as an African-American woman. Adding that U.S. freedom and equality are mere propaganda, she described a country carried by the rich on the backs of the poor.

Listening in horror to details of dates and locations, I realized that these terrible experiences had indeed happened to her. She condemned the United States as powerful, threatening, and imperiously directing foreign policy to occupy and corrupt other nations. She ended by saying that she was ashamed to call herself an American. The audience cheered and applauded loudly, awarding her a standing ovation as she left the stage to scores of hugs and handshakes.

Leaving the auditorium worriedly, Susan and I discussed the speech. In her talk, the delegate had generalized her own experiences to those of all American women, minorities, and

disadvantaged. Despite my childhood in a working-class family and Susan's ardent feminism, we hadn't shared these experiences. But we also knew that the racism she had endured was real and, clearly, that others have suffered poverty and gender discrimination for generations. Since few in the audience would have travelled to the U.S., she supported their worst fears and stereotypes. Irrespective of Susan's and my liberal personal and political beliefs at that moment, the speaker had indeed fueled an increasingly dangerous fire.

A tour of the Baghdad Museum and dinner at the Convention Center followed that day's sessions. Despite some glares, we quietly joined a small group of women conversing in English. When the Lebanese delegate asked me my reaction to the conference, I told her honestly that I was horrified by what I had seen and heard.

I added, "I develop programs for children with disabilities, and I was particularly upset to see the number of child amputees in Lebanon after the war. Where are they being cared for?"

"Mostly at home or in orphanages, since there's no room in the hospitals. But they won't be able to go back to school without assistance. Others, who suffered burns or mental trauma will be cared for by any living family members. Sadly, we have nothing for the disabled."

She studied me carefully. "I can't imagine you would be willing to go there and help after we re-build?"

"Of course. Keep in touch and let me know when the time is right. Then we'll work out the arrangements." I gave her my business card.

"Then perhaps you would also do a smaller favor? My son lives in New York. We have lost mail and telephone service in Lebanon because of the war. I want to let him know that I'm alive and that I miss him. Can I give you a box of cigars to send him when you're back in America?"

Susan laughed. “I live in New York. I’ll call him, tell him you’re fine, and give him the cigars personally.”

“Thank you!” as she wiped away tears streaming down her cheeks. She invited us to sit with her and a Brazilian woman for the dinner.

Despite her angry comments about the U.S. on my initial day at the conference, Celia turned out to be delightful, with an outrageously bawdy sense of humor. A stately and stunning woman from a wealthy family enmeshed in Brazil’s conflicted government, she sacrilegiously joked about every political and social institution possible.

“Our men, they like women Rio-style. They wouldn’t last here an afternoon!” We roared, finally remembering how to just laugh and enjoy the company of other women.

Even in the evening’s more relaxed atmosphere, I worried about my speech. I had spent late nights writing revisions, but the message didn’t have any heart. Since I was shunned by most women at the sessions, finding an Arab speaker to help personalize it was difficult.

But I remembered Rana, a friendly young Iraqi conference assistant who had greeted me with her story of fond memories of a childhood with her family in California. Slipping away from the table, I caught up with her as she left the hall.

Her open smile disappeared when I made my request. Inhaling, “Yes, I’ll work with you on it, but only if no one’s around. If you give it to me early tomorrow with your questions, I’ll hand it back to you later. But don’t tell anyone. It *is* a risk.”

As I thanked her and returned to the table, my thoughts reflected on her world here in Baghdad. I have always felt that the air feels different in non-human-rights countries. From the moment we step off the plane, to subsequent observations of people coming and going between work and home, and even between those engaged in friendly conversations, there’s a

watchfulness, a sense of looking around to see who may be listening. But I was learning that even in such threatening environments where we exhale fear and anxiety, the commonalities among all of us are far stronger than that air we breathe and can certainly enrich our relationships.

Yet, it became obvious to me that the lack of open and honest personal and cultural exposure among the many nations represented at the conference had corrupted any sense of commonality. The only woman I could turn to for help had lived in California for years and had come to love Americans.

I realized that the conference delegates' hatred toward us was evident not only because of strong political and religious differences, but from their perception of America and its women. Not only the Iraqis, but the majority of delegates from around the world knew only MTV stereotypes and the conspicuous materialism they saw on filtered news reports. A universal trait that women share is their nurturing love for family. Yet, along with a divorce rate of almost fifty percent, images of many U.S. women dressed very sexually and of others as over-worked professionals appeared to be convincing evidence that we promote the break-down of the family.

Or even if we did care about our own children, it ended there. So we supported kidnapping for body parts or adoptions and looked away when Palestinian teens died from violence and third-world children suffered poverty and disease. With profound personal loss and tragedies in so many families, anger and hatred had moved onto a need for revenge.

Samira's invitation to work with child amputees had been genuine, but also a test. Yet, her longing to contact her adult son and send him a present was universal. When Susan and I responded, she sensed that we cared. How could I reach the remainder of this huge audience? I pondered this after midnight as I completed my speech.

The following day sped by. Early, Susan and I waited on a line extending outside the building as we tried to change our Iraqi Air flights to leave the next day, immediately after conference closing ceremonies. Fearing that the ugly sentiments in the lecture hall might only worsen outside, we had decided to skip the tours of Basra and Babylon. We waited two hours behind women checking on their own flights home, apparently all too familiar with frequent changes and cancellations. But with one weary, irritable woman scheduling flights on a single computer, our chances were non-existent.

“Flights to Frankfurt are full. No other flights in Europe for two or three days. Next?!?”

To further engage her in our plight, I made a foolish attempt at humor as I placed a lollipop on the counter in front of her.

“*Baksheesh?*” I asked with a smile.

Not amused, she threw it fiercely in front of me and watched it smash on the floor.

“Next?” never making eye contact. We moved on.

I found Rana as we entered the conference hall and quietly handed her my next-day’s speech.

“Here it is. I’ve re-written it completely. Just one request. Can you translate the sentences I’ve underlined into Arabic, giving me their phonetic pronunciation in English so I’ll say the words properly?”

Surprised, “Are you expecting the simultaneous translators for the sessions to translate this new speech for the first time as you read it tomorrow?”

As I nodded, she gave an apprehensive headshake.

“They will be furious with you. They request speeches days in advance to cross-translate. Then they just read them at the sessions, maybe even tape them.”

“Is there a chance that they’ll read my former speech instead?”

“Not if we intervene. I’ll contact the conference coordinator right now and ask her to let them know. But don’t expect a present this holiday!” Rana smiled uneasily and moved on.

Finally, the day of my session arrived. I was certain that my paranoia had grown out-of-proportion and that things would go just fine.

“Perhaps no one will even show up,” I mused hopefully as I made my way into the auditorium, noting scores of beautiful children waiting noisily in the lobby. They were all between five and ten years old, busily chatting with their mothers, many of whom were conference delegates. It appeared that the children would be part of this afternoon’s closing session.

I was wrong about both the attendance and the children. For the first time that week, the auditorium over-flowed to encompass more than a thousand women. The first morning speaker artfully elaborated potential social and health proposals in less-developed regions to increase mothers’ survival in childbirth and reduce infant mortality. Her programs sounded wonderful, well-considered, and, as the audience was too well-aware, unlikely to ever happen because of lack of funding.

As she finished, with a deep breath, I gathered my notes and rose reluctantly to walk to the stage. Susan grabbed my arm.

“Wait!” she warned.

The doors opened and several delegates marshalled the large group of children into the auditorium and onto the stage. Only now each child carried a brightly written sign, written in Arabic and English:

“American pigs!” “Zionist-lovers!” “Child-murderers!”

My heart pounding loudly, I watched in disbelief as the women led the children in wide circles on the stage screaming and shouting anti-American slogans. To audience delight, the simultaneous translators found no problem immediately informing us of these words of hatred.

At first, I was confused. The only previous demonstration I had witnessed personally had been earlier that year in downtown Riyadh. Saudi officials had good-naturedly rounded up workers out of their offices, handed them signs, and coached them to shout anti-Western slogans, louder and louder for the news cameras. Glad for the break from work, the demonstrators had participated with gusto, some raising fists in mock or real anger. With the cameras turned off, they joked and laughed immediately, making their way back to their offices.

But this was different. During the eternity of the fifteen-minute protest, I comprehended in horror that this demonstration had been carefully orchestrated to occur just before my speech. And there were no jokes or laughter this time. The organizers were using children purposefully to provoke revengeful anger through reaching the hearts of an all-female audience. It worked.

Most women stood, shouted along with the children, stomping their feet and clapping hands in cadence with the chants as the resounding decibel level increasingly filled the conference hall. Looking toward Celia and Samira, who sat with heads lowered, I realized that I had few supporters.

The demonstration ended in a fever pitch with a continuous standing ovation as the children marched out of the auditorium with their signs. Then the stomping continued impatiently. It was my turn to speak.

Moving almost robotically, I climbed the stage steps and approached the lectern. My eyes searched the wide audience vigilantly for any sign of violence. Along with hisses and apparently name-calling shouts, I noted that many of the women sat down, but removed their

head-sets. Considering what might have occurred, I felt a sudden relief, smiling internally at this mild gesture of contempt.

At that moment, in order to re-engage their attention, I decided to open the speech with the words from Rana's Arabic translation. While my accent would be terrible, hopefully my intent would carry and even the more hostile delegates would decide to listen to the remainder of the speech. As I waited for the quiet to spread, I also saw others who sat and nodded at me, head-sets intact and interested. With their encouragement and Celia's broad grin, I began in Arabic:

أشكر احترامكم لكوني ضيفتكم و المتحدثة في هذا المؤتمر. و على الرغم من خفيتنا و ثقافتنا المختلفة اختلافا عظيما، فنحن كنساء نشارك التحدي النقدي في تربية أطفالا ذو صحة جسمانية و عقلية على الرغم من العالم المضطرب. دعوت هنا اليوم للكشف سويا عن ما أعرفه عن تطوير رعاية الأطفال، و لكن جدت أني لأعرف شئ هذا الأسبوع على الإطلاق.

(I thank you for the honor of being your guest and speaker at this conference. While our backgrounds and cultures may differ greatly, as women we share the critical challenge of raising physically and mentally healthy children despite a troubled world. I was invited here today to explore with you what I know about improving children's care. But I've found this week that I really don't know very much at all.) At this comment, there were both laughter and hisses from the audience.

To great audience surprise, my opening words in Arabic were broadcast across the auditorium. I waited as loud murmurs responded along with some light applause. As I

continued in English, a number of women picked up their discarded head-sets and quietly held one earpiece in place to follow the speech.

So I'll share what I've learned:

I've learned that governments hurt all women and children when they don't support them. We women bear and nurture our young. In turn, our children lead nations and become the future. But a mutilated or prostituted woman cannot bear or raise a healthy child. And a child who is malnourished or lacks an available medication dies or is under-prepared to become a leader. Each day of her life, a mother feels the trauma of losing her child or of seeing amputated limbs. Her anger and grief lessen her ability to nurture and guide her remaining children. She and her family turn to survival instead of hope. Without hope in the future, our resilience to withstand the present is lost.

I've learned that blame and lack of understanding breed hatred. If we women don't have each other and congresses such as this to share our ideas and negate stereotypes, we have nothing. While our cultures and religions differ, our love and concern for our families do not. Until more women are leaders of nations, we and our children will rarely be a priority over greed and politics. But as long as hatred prevails and divides us from the very commonality we share in raising and nurturing our families, we move backward and more children starve or play with land mines.

I've learned that revenge doesn't work. It can't bring back a lost husband or son, or give us food for our families. Revenge is bitter-sweet and momentary. But when it passes, our original pain returns even stronger. The only thing that remains after revenge is the message to our children to expect to live their lives in anger and suffering and to hurt someone else first. The children of revenge become poisoned adults at a young age and view their sole purpose as

injuring or killing others. We as mothers can do better than this for our families and our nations.

And I've learned from you, who sadly know it best, that war hurts everyone. There is no real victor, no country that comes away unscathed, none without wounds inflicted on its families forever. Who is the child that benefits from his father's death, his mother's rape? War is not the answer.

While negative emotions were still powerfully present in the room, I could feel audience attention and even agreement with my comments. Over the next minutes, in the body of the speech, I explored specific physiological, emotional, and educational needs of young children, enabling a solid foundation for a healthy adulthood. Back on my "daily turf" here, I was able to relax more and focus on elaborating the content.

Yet, as I concluded, I was very uncertain what the audience response would be when I left the stage. Unsure that I could safely return to my seat, I decided to end with the prayer Rana had translated and then leave the auditorium immediately.

Let us conclude with a prayer. The audience stood, heads bowed.

جنسية الطفل و عنصره لا يههم، عندما طفل يموت و أم تبكي. أم تبكي لأم أم أخرى، و التي يوم ما سوف يكون
ألمها. دعونا نوحّد قلوبنا اليوم هنا لنقسم على إنهاء أذى و موت الأطفال، و لنشارك كل المصادر المتاحة ذات
المعاني السلمية.

(When a child dies, a mother cries. The child's nationality and race don't matter. One mother cries for another mother's pain, which may someday be her own. Let us join our hearts

together here today to vow to end the harm and death of children and to share all resources through peaceful means.)

As I looked out on this sea of strong women who wanted only a better life for their children, I added the words that had been filling my heart that remarkable afternoon:

Despite our different beliefs, may religions and governments come together to feed the mutual roots that will support our children as they grow. For today's friends and foes alike, Insha'Allah we will meet again in peace--Next year in Jerusalem.

To the echo of "Insha'Allah" across the vast room, I left the stage quickly and slid out the side door. As I heard some applause and progressively louder conversations, I realized in dismay that when ascending the stage, I had left the purse containing my passport on the speaker's table.

Another thing I had learned this trip was that without a passport, a person was country-less and in deep trouble. I saw Susan rush past delegates pouring out of the auditorium.

"Here, I thought you might need this!" I hugged her in gratitude as she solidly handed me the purse.

Before we could move outside to discuss the audience response, the North Vietnamese reporter grabbed my arm.

"Can I interview you?"

"Why?" I asked in surprise, afraid that my comments would be used as propaganda.

"Most of my readers will be surprised. Your words and ideas were respectful and important."

"OK," I agreed hesitatingly. "But no political questions. The article can be only about women and children."

Abashed, she nodded and moved me to a quieter corner. But individually and in pairs, a number of women followed us. As I stopped to visit with them, they thanked me for my comments, several having their words translated into English by others:

“We are ashamed that they used children in the protest.”

“You’re right! We have to focus our attention on what we can achieve in our families.”

And mostly, “Thank you for being here and agreeing to speak.”

I was taken aback most strongly as a Palestinian woman in a solemn black *abaya* waited for others to leave and then commented, “My English is not good, but I want to tell you that my son died in the *antifada* last year. My family mourn him each day and my younger sons plan their revenge. But we must not let this happen. I cannot lose any more children. Thank you for your words.” Stoically, she walked away.

So the sentiment changed in a small way. Did most women there still feel anger and even hatred toward Americans? Of course. I knew that even if I were the cleverest of speakers, I couldn’t change that. But I felt that the tide was moving again, that the earlier waves of sentiment had been buttressed for awhile. Despite their rage, they had invited me and allowed me to speak. And putting their emotions aside, they had listened.

But it was I who learned and changed the most. In the following days, as we boarded planes and vans to tour Basra, I sat with different women and heard stories of their families, of death and disappointment. As we observed the Iraqi and Iranian troops standing with weapons steadily pointed at each other across the Arab River, they spoke of fathers, brothers, and husbands still missing after seven years of war. We drove past men stripped to the waist in 119-degree desert heat, pushing boulders without equipment as they re-built roads and villages. At

the ruins of Babylon, we stood together and marvelled over the brilliance of its architects and scientists, yet recognizing that a civilization had been lost.

There were light moments as well. We all watched two totally cloaked women dutifully follow their husbands as they walked down the street in conversation. Yet, each was holding out the front of her dark veil so as not to burn a cigarette hole.

On a tour, Celia and I were each grabbed by the arm and pulled roughly from a mosque by an angry man who felt it was blasphemy to allow us to enter. Shouting, he snatched off our *abayas* and yelled seemingly horrible things at us in Arabic. Seeing this, several Iraqi women from our group came to our assistance and chased him away. How we laughed afterwards at when he stood in the receiving line in the reception hall. He was one of the hosts! Yet, as we passed through, all the women in our group moved by him quickly, none even acknowledging him or returning his now-friendly greeting.

It was time to go home. The conference and tour over, we were boarding the bus for the airport. Samira pressed a box of cigars into Susan's hands.

"I wrote my son a long letter too, with his address on the envelope. You'll see he gets these?"

"I can't wait to meet him," Susan responded, "and let him know about his wonderful mother."

Hugging me tightly, Samira whispered, "*Insha'Allah*, next year in Jerusalem."

"*Insha'Allah*," I prayed.