

Sept 21, 2000
by Jamey Bouwmeester

STRUGGLES IN THE MIRROR

Standing on the wharf, an Esgenoôpetitj community member looked out at the water of Miramichi Bay, out at the buoys that mark the community's lobster traps. "Sometimes I imagine what it would be like," she said and paused. "Sometimes I imagine what it would be like if we could fish in peace. If we didn't always have to look over our shoulders to make sure the DFO (Department of Fisheries and Oceans) aren't there. This could be a beautiful place."

In my mind I'm transported halfway across the world to the Beqa'a valley outside of Hebron. Sitting under a fig tree and watching the sun set. A Palestinian man beside me is saying things almost identical to those I've just heard on the wharf. "Before they built the bypass road there were never soldiers here; now there's a patrol every few minutes. When we sat under my brother's trees it was like a garden in a dream; now they've bulldozed those too. This could be paradise if they'd just leave us alone."

This fall, after spending more than two years with CPT in Hebron, I came to our New Brunswick project. I was looking for a change of scenery and I certainly got one. One doesn't have to look far to find vast differences between Maritime Canada and the Middle East. However, since my arrival it's been the similarities that have struck me most profoundly.

In Hebron a few hundred Israeli settlers, with the aid and complicity of the Israeli army, can hold the entire Palestinian population of the city hostage for weeks at a time. In New Brunswick, non-native fishers have destroyed traps belonging to the Esgenoôpetitj community. Lately they have been threatening direct violence and creating a general mood of incitement and anger, all with the tacit approval of the police.

In the past weeks the DFO has rammed and sunk several Esgenoôpetitj boats, throwing those aboard into the bay. Then they proceeded to mace and beat the community members before pulling them out of the water. Yet it is the natives who have been charged with crimes. Palestinians are routinely arrested in Hebron for being the victims of settler attacks, or for resisting the demolitions of their homes.

But the similarities between Esgenoôpetitj and Hebron transcend headlines too. In both places I've been welcomed with hospitality and humor. Homes have opened and smiles come easily. I think the way little girl's eyes grow wide when they're thrown in the air is universal.

I hold a mirror up to Esgenoôpetitj and I can see Hebron. I hold it up to the Bay and in it are reflected grape vines. I hold it up to one face and I see another thousands of miles away. And I hear the echoes come from across the world, spoken by the person sitting next to me. "This could be paradise."