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I Remember, I Remember

by Lesley Dawson

Sitting still is not something I do very often, not something at which I excel. Despite learning how to meditate with the Trappist Brothers at Latroun Abbey, I am naturally a very restless person. Always on the go.

There have been times when I had no choice but to sit and watch and wait, despite wanting to get up and join in whatever activity was going on.

I remember during the First Gulf War sitting in the chapel at Notre Dame Centre in Jerusalem waiting for the all-clear from the Israeli authorities that indicated no more scuds were being launched from Iraq. The chapel was the prescribed sealed room to which we had to run when the sirens went off. We watched each other as we learnt to quickly throw on some clothes before the door was sealed. The prize for the best-dressed person went to a South American priest who looked as if he had never gone to bed compared with the rest of us, rumpled, half clothed and half asleep still.

I remember sitting by the side of the bed of a man who was recovering from a stroke while two of my students tried to ignore me and find out what the patient could still do. I tried to be a fly on the wall so as not to intrude in their deliberations. I kept my hands in my lap to give the impression of being confident they knew what they were doing. Because I was the foreigner and they always know better than local people, the watching relatives kept asking the students to ask me for my opinion and I kept batting the questions back to the students to answer in Arabic. It would have been simpler just to take over and let them watch but the amount of learning would not have been the same and the loss of face experienced by needing to be shown by a foreigner would have been hard to retrieve.

I remember the early evening sun gradually sinking as the graduates processed up to the stage to receive their certificates. Each time a fresh set of relatives dressed in traditional costume loudly ululated their pride in their son or daughter. Those who had already had their moment of fame on the platform with the Vice Chancellor, began to dance in their excitement that they had finally reached the end of their programme.

It had been quite protracted because of the closure universities by the curfews imposed during the bombing but the day had finally come, and they were going to enjoy it to the full. No western dignity here, this was a Middle Eastern celebration. I too wanted to get up and dance, but protocol insisted I sit in my place amongst my Palestinian colleagues and pretend to be professional and calm. The bench upon which I sat was hard and the ceremony had been long but, hard as it was, I had to sit still, albeit with a big smile on my face, as I remembered all the barriers these kids had overcome to get to this day.