

A close-up portrait of Dr. Deborah Heifetz, a woman with dark hair pulled back, smiling warmly. She is wearing a dark blazer over a white collared shirt, a multi-strand pearl necklace, and gold spiral earrings. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

# PEACE CREATOR

TEXT: SANDRA-STELLA TRIEBL

Dr. Deborah Heifetz is an extraordinary woman with a background that is just as extraordinary. For example, she has a PhD in social anthropology, but additionally a Masters in Dance as well as a Bachelor in Genetics. As I said - Deborah is an extraordinary woman. Because - as if that were not enough - she is a certified mediator and was an advisor to the Crisis Management Team of the Israeli Security Forces and consulted in mediation initiatives between Israelis and Palestinians. Until recently she taught at Tel Aviv University topics ranging from Dancing Gender to Culture, Conflict and Community Development. She is a Laban-Movement-Analyst and integrates the therapeutic systems of Somatic Experiencing - a tool to heal collective trauma. To pass on her 30 years of experience, she co-founded BraveHearts International, located in Cologne, jointly with her husband. Privately, the Israeli, who was raised in Beverly Hills, lives with her German husband at the idyllic Orta-Lake, in the north of Italy. Deborah is not someone, with whom one just has a little chit-chat. Within a few moments, she manages to get under your skin with her



**Ladies Drive: Do you share with me the scent of your childhood?** when you start being conscious of what happened to you that's a good start. At least that was the case for me when I look back at my childhood - the triggers of these days keep coming back and I really need to take care, that they don't haunt me down, that I don't get lost in it.

Dr. Deborah Heifetz: Oh...(*thinking*)....do I have to only pick one?

**No!**

One is cinnamon. Another one is gardenias....and I would say...(*laughs*) the scent of my childhood: sautéed onions!

**How was your childhood between cinnamon, gardenias and salted onions?**

I was an unhappy child - torn inside and deeply confused. I felt ugly and unpretty, looking different from the "barbie dolls" who went to school with me in Beverly Hills. My life with three older brothers was filled with mixed messages. I was loved but being a girl had less value than being a boy. I was the whip cream on the cake but didn't want to be the whip cream - I wanted to be the cake. Being a female and being me was inherently less valued and valuable than being a boy. It wasn't just in my family, it was also a belief in the outside world. Women had less value than men. Girls had less value than boys - less talent - less intelligence than boys. What girls did was 'girlie' – and that was an insult. At the same time, I was also raised to be smart and knowledgeable so that I could be a good wife and mother. But the effort or intent to value my interests and natural talents were never seriously encouraged. I was ashamed of what I loved and what intrigued me – dance, therapy, psychology, social work. So - I never really wanted to be female. In university, I studied biochemistry and genetics - and couldn't have been further away from my personality and talents. Oh, I asked some interesting research questions, like what do flying insects do in the rain? Or what happens if you change the environment of a neuron, will it change its firing threshold? But to be in a research lab was not me in the least. I pushed myself into fields of science, which I thought would feed the hole in my belly – would strengthen my self-esteem, self-respect and self-worth.

I turned my life around after I finished my undergraduate degree at UC Berkeley and did basic neuroscience research at MIT. It happened working with a writer who discovered she had cancer – the realization and question hit me that if I would die, what would be my biggest regret? The answer was not having danced. Within several months, I auditioned and enrolled to the Master's degree program in the dance department at UCLA. I studied and researched Dance and Anthropology, writing my Master's thesis on Urban Cowboy Dance during the Reagan administration (1980) and the release of Urban Cowboy. During my graduate studies, I was required to take a choreography class with the well-respected American choreographer, Marion Scott. I had never been in a choreography class before. When I performed my first choreography, Marion sat there looking at me in silence. She then spoke and slowly said: "My God, I haven't seen anything that feminine in years!" I remember looking at her in shock. Who me? Feminine? I only wore black those days. I had such an inner tension. I always had this inner conflict of being at ease with who I am, which has giving me deep compassion for other people and their struggles. These are the drivers in my life.

**Sometimes when people experience things like you just shared with me, it takes them almost a lifetime to cope with it. I think**

Absolutely. That's the work. That's the work of self compassion. Intimacy with our own self – with our vulnerabilities - also feeds our capacity to feel compassion with other people.

**Deborah, I'm curious - how did it come that you have been involved in the track II negotiations between Israel and Palestine?**

When I was a child – our dinner table was a learning space. I was taught to argue both sides of an argument, to follow ethical principles and think them through. To reason clearly and honestly. But there was one thing that I was taught around that dinner table, which was particularly empowering: That I should never blindly obey authority but to think critically and according to my values. Authority had to earn its legitimacy. For all the confusion I had about being who I am as a female, I never doubted my power, built upon my values of human life and human fairness. So - fast forward: When I look at my life and professional trajectory, it's a curiosity-driven journey to understand human relationships and human behaviour. Studying genetics is one perspective and studying dance is another. I researched dance ethnology and dance performance as culture and religion. When people dance in a circle, that circle becomes a "Magic Circle", because it contains a story with layers of meaning created by community and embodied moment by moment through the dance. Transformation happens through this shared lived experience imbued with significance. A community's values and its symbols are inscribed on the dancers bodies. In principle, the same was true when I watched the 'choreography of change' between Israeli and Palestinian officers and soldiers fulfilling the Oslo Agreements, when they transformed from fighters to peacekeepers.

The story began when I moved to Israel in 1991 in the aftermath of Iraq's bombing of Tel Aviv, where my friends and in-laws lived. I realized that I needed to be there and nowhere else. I wanted to invest my energy into healing that land, a place where I didn't feel like a minority. Back then I was married to an Israeli. During those early years, the Oslo Agreements were being signed (Oslo I, signed in Washington, D.C. in 1993; Oslo II, signed in Taba, Egypt, in 1995).

The agreements formulated a unique experiment in security cooperation. Israeli security forces and Palestinian security forces were assigned the roles of being their own non-mediated peacekeeping forces. They dispatched the Joint Patrols, which became the subject of my Ph.D. thesis in social anthropology from Tel Aviv University. Unlike United Nation peacekeeping forces, the Oslo agreements created a model where the enemies worked, ate, drank, discussed, shared mobile phones and supported each other to coordinate "peace patrols". They worked together to fulfill the

Oslo agreements, with the understanding and belief that this would support the transition from war to peace during that vulnerable period during the 1990s. For five years I sat on the patrols for my PhD. Research. I travelled throughout the West Bank and Gaza strip. I sat on patrols, stood at check points, watched coordinating meetings at the District Coordinating Offices and spent hours talking to Israeli and Palestinian officers and soldiers about their challenges and dreams. It was a choreography of change, a transformation from fighters to peacekeepers, which I saw through the eyes of a dance ethnologist/social anthropologist. What I saw was the negotiation of two very different kinds of masculinities. Israeli military men consisting of Druze, Bedouin and Jewish men with middle eastern backgrounds, Ethiopian and the northern European backgrounds...coordinating with Palestinian military men, consisting of Palestinians who had lived for years under occupation, or fought with the PLO from the Palestinian diaspora in Algeria and Egypt. All these different types of masculinities were trying to create trust! What is trust if not the negotiation of fear and the reassurance that one side will not abuse another's vulnerability? What is terrorism, if not using the weapon of fear and abuse of human frailty?

At that time nobody was really talking about emotions and security cooperation. I had three little boys at home and was witnessing these patterns between boys being boys and expressing their hurt emotions and pride - it was both intriguing and painful. In my PhD I described what I named non-mediated peacekeeping, and that it involved human needs, identity and emotions. I wanted to share what I observed and contribute to peacebuilding. However, not having been through the Israeli military nor any other military I lacked authority. Add to that that I am a woman and my research was a challenging ethnography, it was tough for me to translate my insights in a way that I could make myself understood.

I didn't give up and tried to introduce the idea of emotions to people involved in the peacekeeping process and involved in the ongoing peace negotiations, so I reached out to where I thought I can have a conversation in an academic setting - and that was at the Institute of Counterterrorism (*laughs*). With various officers and counter terrorist experts - all serious military people - I began teaching a seminar on Gender and Terrorism with a counter-terrorist expert who had just finished her Ph.D. on Hamas. She would go in prisons and interview captured members of Hamas. Her own family background was from Iraq, whose ancient Jewish community was expelled in the 1950s, because Iraq like other Middle East countries didn't recognize Israel. My colleague spoke Arabic and had remarkable insights on the dispatchers who sent out female suicide bombers. Together we co-taught this seminar and it was quite clear that I had an American perspective - an outsider who was trying to see and hear both voices. Through my colleague's connections I met Israeli secret service agents, went with her to conferences and at one point met a man who was on the crises management team. I told him that I wanted to join the team because "I can give you a perspective no one else can give you. I'm an Anthropologist and I can give you a different voice". And

that's how I got engaged. In addition, I was asked to participate in a track II negotiations because of my research. In that process I asked people to discuss "needs" and not "interests". When we speak about needs, the conversation opens up in a very rich direction. Emotions become a part, which can lead to very creative problem solving.

**Right...!**

And a very different type of vulnerability and tenderness. For me that was where the action was.

**Did all the generals and counter terrorism experts, the agents accept your inputs?**

Well what happened was - about a year in, we were trying to get a joint document written where the Israelis talk about what they need for their border and what the Palestinians need for theirs. We didn't discuss where the Israeli-Palestinian border would be, but the nature of its permeability. After one year, we had not succeeded to receive a document from the Palestinian side that specified what they needed vis-à-vis border permeability. So we finally met at village outside of Jerusalem one Sunday morning - and I was part of the Israeli group, right - I was part of the military security team. So we sat together - Israeli and Palestinian Generals and me and they started to talk the way they always did. I decided to intervene and asked "May I invite you to indulge me in an experiment?" - They looked at me, rolled their eyes and I proceeded to separate the group into two. Israeli and Palestinian. I then asked the Israeli side to write down what they think the Palestinians need in relationship to the border between Israel and Palestine. I asked the Palestinians the same question in reverse - to discuss and write down what they think the Israeli's need regarding the same border. It was an exercise in thinking and feeling at the same time. After 15 minutes the two groups came back together. I was in the Israeli group so of course it was easier for us to specify Palestinian's needs because I just spent 5 years talking to Palestinians about their needs and challenges. But when the Palestinians wrote down their Israeli version, they proceeded to read what they, the Palestinians needed! So both sides talked about what the Palestinians needed. It was a little awkward - but very touching and revealing. On a practical level, a document was written so that the Track II could proceed further. But on an heartfelt level, I was touched when over the break a Palestinian general came over to me on the balcony and said: „Sometimes I just don't know who my enemies are". This comment meant a lot. You see, in a negotiation, one doesn't express empathy for the other side because it weakens one's negotiation position. So if your enemy willingly expresses empathy and is willing to articulate your needs, then is he they really your enemy?" It was a moment of tenderness and insight on the power of needs and

emotions to transform conflict and build trust. Although I studied NonViolent Communication with Marshall Rosenberg, I had not used it this way before. The basic principle of doing emotion-work around needs is as relevant for interpersonal relationships as it is for international conflicts. It's just a matter of scale and content. That was really the moment for me, the basis for why and how I began to develop the Human Needs Matrix model.

### **Can you share that Matrix with us?**

I'm in the process of publishing it. Ultimately as human beings we are all social animals and designed to need each other. Because we can't survive otherwise our bodies and brains have evolved to respond to danger when our social connection is at risk. At the same time, we have muscle power and take pleasure in exerting our will – even in taking advantage of other people's vulnerability. This creates the basic tension between what I call the "Hungers" for Power and Love. In a different way we have a tension between our Hungers for Meaning and Survival, killing for a cause, willing to die for our values or disappear if we are shamed. We may also do the inverse - give up our values in order to survive. The model is built whereby each Hunger is "fed" by a need pair. The model is actually on my website with a short explanation. It has been a really hard article for me to write and I look forward to completing it. My husband is also a thinking partner and he's added another dimension to the model that incorporates spiritual principles of higher consciousness. If we can grasp that the binary me/you is a limited reality, and that a larger truth is our ultimate interconnectivity, then we can sequence from independence to interdependency up to our interconnectivity. It is the movement towards greater consciousness - and healing. That may sound like a mouthful but it can be quite elegant.

### **That's so amazing...but please share with us what happened after you left the peacekeeping process...**

Well, after I decided that I couldn't make the impact on the level that I had hoped for, I decided to use my efforts to focus on a different kind of change. In that same period, I met my current husband Frieder Krups - a German by the way! He brought me to Bosnia and Pakistan for economic development work and I saw how peace building and economic development go hand in hand. At that point in my life I decided to engage in civil society change - that's also the reason why we moved to Lake Orta. Because here life is built more on human scale. We hope to contribute to our area's sustainable development. We are working with the mayor of our village and potential is exciting. I feel a lot of hope and possibility to create and enjoy the beauty of Italian culture.

I believe that you can talk in your magazine about spirituality and business because ultimately there is a rise in consciousness and awareness of our interconnectivity. We have to be embodied and spiritual beings at the same time. Growing up with a lot of contradictions helped me build capacity to "hold" contradictions without being overwhelmed by them, because I don't expect that there is simplicity. I don't expect that there is just one way. We are a physical

being and a spiritual being - we are both. For me this growing understanding and consciousness is building towards a critical mass. All of us – your work – the subject of your interview bridging spirituality and business - contributes to this achievement. The women whom I met at your conference were open and receptive to grow and create. My sense is that you have brought together women who are working towards building a better world. So I'm just doing my piece of this work.

### **And your „piece of it“ is also consulting people and companies with your Bravehearts Institute?**

My husband and I are the founders. The Institute is a coaching company. We are facilitators - we both facilitate in communities and in business. We help people become compassionate leaders. At the moment, we are designing a two-year training program called „The Journey“ to give people tools for a personal transformation.

### **You've already shared that you see business and spirituality as - let's call it - unity. But I'm sure there are people who think that spirituality has nothing to do in business. Can you tell me how you define spirituality?**

My value system frames spirituality in service of reducing human suffering and enhancing the quality of human life. So for me, spirituality is where we can ultimately grasp life's complexity and shift from a focus on our interdependency to our interconnectivity. For instance - for me as a woman, if one woman succeeds, all women succeed. Spirituality is recognizing our interconnectivity. And therefore it is an invitation for greater compassion and richer consciousness to live according to values that support the quality of life.

### **And what would you say to someone who says that all of this has nothing to do with serious business...? This is mambo-jambo?**

I would ask a question: what's the purpose of business?

### **True! Good point.**

Or I'd ask: „do you believe that poor people are lazy?“ - The truth is that poor people are among the most hard working people on the world. Refugees are incredibly hard working people. The question is: what is your cosmology? What's your value system? How do we make sense of the world? How do we define giving back? How do we teach refugees the values we hold sacred so that they can be part of "us". Business can teach and reflect our core values. The business-consumer relationship is an opportunity. A feedback loop where the consumer drives production and the business can reflect and drive values. Therefore the consumer needs to be conscious as well as the business. So how can we all be more conscious of the impact we have

because we live in an interconnected world? - Business doesn't exist or thrive in a vacuum.

**If your value system is all about making more money and is all about growth...then it starts to get tricky. Because these people see the interdependency, they create - but they just do not care.**

What I find among the business leaders worldwide I work with, I rarely meet people who made it to the top who by the age of 50 still talk about money. Almost all of them are dealing with loneliness, with relationship issues, with the wish to have more meaning in their life, to give back - they look for a higher purpose - you don't meet successful people who get to a certain degree of wealth who are still interested in gaining more wealth for wealth's sake. What really preoccupies them is relationship and meaning. Unless they are pretty psychotic like Trump— but then you have a mental emotional handicap. But most people start to question their belief that more is the signature for happiness. The only thing one can never have enough of is the love of their children. The love of the people around them. I can never have enough time with my grandchildren and my friends or with beauty. I mean how...

**...how many material things do we really need?**

Yes! I mean most of us can go shopping in our own closets! There has never been a higher degree of suicide in the USA today than since World War 2. Happiness has nothing to do with more purchasing. Ultimately it is about relationship and giving that makes us most happy. Joy is in our aliveness, when we get physical - when we run, dance, make music, when we feel our body, when we're physically alive, when we're intimate - we are physical animals. And see, for me growing up in Beverly Hills, Hollywood...well more material stuff is just...not interesting! It just doesn't get to the essence of what brings joy!

**What would you advise if someone reads this interview, this issue, and would like to have a deeper dive into the topic, what should he or she do?**

Anything that is going to bring a culture of connection within your company is going to satisfy your employees' basic need for connection and Security. And having a higher purpose is going to motivate and make people feel joy and create more commitment to your company. They are going to feel excited about what they are creating together. They will feel inspired to work for you.

**But how do you do that?**

One is to create a culture of communication, sharing and giving feedback. Two is I don't believe in fear as a motivating force. Motivation comes more from a shared commitment to improve or to be creative. Problem solving should be seen as a good healthy challenge. And ask yourself: What's the higher purpose of our business, how are we giving back to society? And maybe that's the connection to spirituality. If you think about how your business is contributing to the quality of life of people - that is inspiring! If you are part of the tobacco industry you have a really hard time arguing that you're doing good for people. I also think that supporting local economies is really important.

The more we can strengthen local economies the more we support the local quality of life. Switzerland has a lot to teach. The way that your country is designed on different levels of scale of self-management is quite remarkable. You can teach the rest of the world how a business can contribute to the sustainability of local communities. And that's very spiritual, very giving, and a very sustainable way of looking at business. How is your business contributing to sustainability, environmentally, socially, culturally? Who would not want to work for a company that has this kind of higher purpose?

**I guess if you want something for yourself try to give it to others.**

Exactly. If you want the respect of others, be respectful of them. If you do, it will come back - because...

**...we are interconnected.**

Yes! So spirituality...I know it is also about the Shamans, esoteric things - I mean I come from California! I'm not interested in people who speak about spirituality and then turn around and scream at others, people who can't connect with others. If you don't know how to be compassionate, if you don't know how to feel your own suffering then don't talk to me about your spirituality. Then you're detached from your body - from your feelings - from your heart. It takes courage and spiritual grounding to break through the barriers of our fears. We have to be deeply embodied in our spirituality. Only then we can feel and act compassionately.