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Images of peacemaking in the Middle East

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today

In the last month or so, a narrative film, a documentary and a poster on Facebook came across my desk. The films were sent for review, but the Facebook poster (or image) arrived in my newsfeed this morning, unbidden, a "share" from my youngest sister.

"Weaving Life: The Life and Death of Peacemaker Dan Terry" is a documentary from MennoMedia that will air on participating ABC stations beginning Oct. 25 (check local listings). It is the story of Dan Terry, one of 10 humanitarian workers killed on Aug. 5, 2010, as they made their way to Kabul, Afghanistan, from the Nuristan Province in the south. At first the Islamic Party and the Taliban took credit for the attack, but later, some Taliban leaders refuted this and condemned the killings.

Why were Terry and his companions killed? In the documentary, Terry's friends and colleagues explain the complex reality that is Afghanistan and say the work of the U.S.-led allied forces is aimed at development, schools and medical clinics, but with a political end. Humanitarian aid workers do the same, but to help the people help themselves. Afghans, at times, cannot tell the difference, and humanitarian aid workers become political targets.

Terry lived and worked in Afghanistan for 40 years. He and his wife raised three daughters there during the Russian invasion, Taliban rule and the current U.S.-led war. Terry was a Methodist who lived and often worked with Mennonite humanitarian and medical groups to empower the people of Afghanistan to sustain themselves through farming and education.

One story that stands out in the film for me is that of a 12-year-old girl who stood up at a gathering in her remote village to ask for a school after humanitarian workers asked the people what they needed. The leaders of the village and the workers built two schools, one for boys and one for girls. Then came the years of Taliban rule, and no one knew what had happened. Aid workers visited several years later, and

one of the schools was still functioning. The teacher looked familiar -- the 12-year-old girl had become the teacher.

Terry grew up in northern India and was greatly influenced by the life and teachings about nonviolence of Gandhi. Dan's father, George Terry, also influenced the young man; he was a conscientious objector during World War II, something almost unheard of.

Terry emerges from the film as an adventurer, an extraordinary gentleman who taught his daughters to always be gracious to others and that wherever they put their carpets was home. Terry was a Christian but not a missionary, per se. He said he was "giving witness, not by preaching, but by being the face of love."

As I watched the film, I kept thinking of the book *Three Cups of Tea*, a personal account of author Greg Mortenson's peacemaking work in Pakistan, the facts of which have been called into question. I loved the book and I pray it is true, but in "Weaving Life," I felt like I was seeing one man's gentle peace-building effort come to life through image and sound. In other ways, the film reminded me of another documentary, "The Garden at the End of the World," which I reviewed last year. The film provides a look at Afghanistan in ruins through the eyes of children and widows, but also hope for the future.

An Afghan carpet is an emblem made up of many threads that yield something so beautiful, it serves as a gathering place to welcome people. Weaving a carpet is the perfect metaphor for the life of the peacemaker Dan Terry.

This fine film is a student production from the Eastern Mennonite University's Department of Visual and Communication Arts. The animated illustrations in the film may stand in for footage that was unavailable, but they are well done.

Advertisement

'Where Do We Go Now?'

"Where Do We Go Now?" is a DVD from Sony Pictures Classics. It is a wry film that plays on irony but is never cynical. It is from Lebanese director Nadine Labaki and takes place in an unnamed "lonely town" that is "split to its core." Yes, divided between cross and crescent, but more than anything, the division is between the men who fight at the least provocation and the women who live to bury them. But the Muslim and Catholic Christian women are tired of it. The women, who understand one another on a deeply organic level and genuinely like and respect each other, get along in true harmony in ways their men don't even notice. The women take things into their own hands to create peace to gentle comic effect.

This well-conceived, -written, -directed and -acted story opens and closes with parallel sequences that frame the narrative. Christian and Muslim women process together in the beginning along the hot, broken road to the cemetery. They are sisters in death and mourning, and they are not going to take it anymore. For the ending -- well, you must see it yourself.

When one of the sons is killed in the crossfire of a skirmish between Christians and Muslims of another town, the local men are ready to fight. The women try reason and cajoling. When this fails, the women lace sweet pastries with hashish so they men won't feel like fighting, and they even hire, in collusion with

the priest and imam, a group of Ukrainian exotic dancers to distract them.

Finally, the Muslim women shed their hijabs for Western clothes and the Christian women put on the hijab. One elderly Christian man comes upon his wife praying on a mat and asks her, in disbelief, if she has taken up yoga at her age and thinks she has lost her mind when he sees how she is dressed. A Muslim woman, her hair now uncovered and blowing in the wind, yells at her husband, "You men are driving us nuts," saying this is how she dresses now. Another Christian woman's husband curses her through the bathroom door. The wife and mother tells him, "We are already cursed. You broke our hearts! We have nothing to live for!"

"Where are you going?" he asks in desperation as she comes out.

"To Mecca!" she yells back.

One Christian mother ties up and gags her fiery son. Dressed in the hijab, she brings him food and tells the astonished young man, "Now you live with the enemy. I'm one of them now. What more can you do?" He is utterly speechless.

As the dancers leave town on the rickety old bus, the priest asks his friend the imam if they got away with their conspiracy to distract the men. The imam says, "Down here, yes, but I'm not so sure about up there."

I won't give away the ending to this good-hearted film that is completely jarring, radical and brilliant.

The mother whose son was killed bids us farewell in a voiceover:

My story is now ending for all those who were listening.

Of a town where peace was found,

While fighting continued all around.

Of men who slept so deep

And woke to find new peace.

Of women still in black

Who fought with flowers and prayers

Instead of guns and flares

And to protect their children.

Destiny drove them to find a new way.

Malala Yousafzai

I am following the news, as many are, about the recent attack on 14-year-old Pakistani schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai. In a most fitting way, this image appeared on Facebook this morning. It is a commentary from

"half the sky" on peacemaking:

THESEYU TAKE TRIZO CITY
12

WHAT TERRIFIES
RELIGIOUS EXTREMISTS
LIKE the TALIBAN
ARE NOT AMERICAN
TANKS or BOMBS
or BULLETS...



IT'S A
GIRL
WITH A
BOOK.

MALALA YOUSAFZAI

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