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Afghanistan journal, part one: Learning a nonviolent lifestyle in Kabul

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Dear friends, the following diary notes are being sent from Kabul, Afghanistan, where we have limited electrical power and Internet connection. I offer them to share my heartbreaking, extraordinary experience so far in war-torn Afghanistan.

Dec. 3: Dubai, United Arab Emirates

The flight from Atlanta to Dubai lasted almost 14 hours, and I'm exhausted but excited to be going to Kabul to meet the Afghan Peace Volunteers, a diverse community of students ages 15 to 27 who practice peace and nonviolence. I made it through customs without any trouble, collected my luggage, changed some money and caught a taxicab across Dubai to the other terminal, where I now have an eight-hour wait for my 4:20 a.m. flight to Kabul. In the distance, I see the famous skyscrapers of this wealthy city, a kind of Mid-East Las Vegas and oil center. But my thoughts are set on impoverished, war-torn Afghanistan and the hope of its peacemaking youth who invited me to visit them.

Dec. 4: Kabul

We set off in the dark over the resorts and the sea toward the unknown. I was wide awake and excited, even though I hardly slept for two days. At 6 a.m., orange light appeared along the horizon. Then all of a sudden, a giant ball of bright orange light popped up, shedding light below over hundreds of miles of majestic mountains.

Sunrise over Afghanistan! The enormous mountains went on forever, and we flew for almost an hour before the small valley of Kabul appeared below. So my first impression of Afghanistan was staggering,

majestic beauty, the likes of which I've never seen. Five hundred miles of the Alps. Snow-covered mountains as far as the eye can see.

I immediately thought of Jesus' commandment, "Love your enemies," which has been so much on my mind and heart these last few months as I've prepared for this trip. There, he connects love for enemies with the sunrise: "Love your enemies, then you will be sons and daughters of your heavenly God who makes the sun rise on the good and the bad." What a consolation!

I thought, too, of Gandhi's declaration: "A nonviolent person sees the whole world as a family, and so he fears no one and no one fears him." I want to embody that Gandhian spirit of nonviolence on this trip, to see everyone I meet as my very sister and brother.

I would like to look at Kabul and the Afghan people through the eyes of the God of peace, the eyes of the nonviolent Jesus, with the vision of love. As the plane approached, I felt only love for these suffering people, who are loved unconditionally, infinitely, nonviolently by the God of peace. What a waste that we live in fear and hatred of one another, that we allow terror, war, drones, greed and poverty to continue, that we don't end this global violence, turn from centuries of war, institutionalize justice, equality and nonviolent conflict resolution, and live together in peace.

Lonely Planet ranks Afghanistan 173 out of 178 nations in terms of wealth, marking it one of the poorest nations on earth. It is also considered the most corrupt nation on earth and has the second-highest infant mortality rate. A recent U.N. report states that chronic malnourishment in Afghanistan is now on par with the worst places in Africa. There are about 31 million people in Afghanistan, and 68 percent of them are under 25.

Five million people live in Kabul. From the air, it looks like a city of low brown buildings surrounded by brown walls and brown roads with no trees and no water. But as the plane approached the runway, the towering mountains around us disappeared, and we entered a heavy yellow/brown layer of pollution. Kabul, one of the poorest places on the planet, is also one of the most polluted. One can barely breathe here, another legacy of war.

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I made it through customs again, caught a bus out of the airport, and was met by the smiling faces of the young Peace Volunteers and, of course, Hakim, the charismatic 43-year-old medical doctor who is the friend and mentor of the Afghan Peace Volunteers and one of the world's great peacemakers.

We piled into a cab and took off across the city. What a hair-raising experience! Thousands of cars speeding at 65 mph. No lights, no stop signs, and no rules. Everyone yelling and speeding and cutting in front of one another. And children walking right through it all!

Sure enough, someone cut in front of our cab. Our driver exploded in rage and took off after him through the sea of speeding cars. Suddenly, I was in "The Bourne Supremacy." They sped next to each other, yelled and grimaced-- and then, as if on cue, they both turned their cars right into one another and -- crash! We smashed into the other car. The left side-view mirror was torn off, and the whole left side of the cab was damaged. But we were hit harder, so the taxi lurched forward and hit a bike, throwing the biker off into the air, and then ran over the bike. We stopped, everyone yelled at each other, the biker got up, shook off the dust, picked up his flattened bike, then everyone took off again into the sea of angry traffic.

It was then, as everyone caught their breath and recovered from the shock, that Hakim turned to me and said with a smile, "Welcome to Afghanistan!"

Hakim facilitated the forming of the Afghan Peace Volunteers three years ago, when he started to teach peace and nonviolence in the village of Bamiyan. Originally from Singapore, he had been serving Afghan refugees in Pakistan, moved into Afghanistan, and decided the best way to promote health in Afghanistan was to teach peace and nonviolence. Sixteen multi-ethnic college students accepted his challenge and started living together for a semester as an intentional peace community modeled after Gandhi's ashram. Some of the youth from different villages and valleys formed a core group and studied nonviolence, organized peace walks, and even built a peace park in Bamiyan. Of course, threats were made against Hakim and the students, and one day, Hakim's village house was pillaged and set on fire. Last year, to expand their work, they moved to Kabul.

A few years ago, Hakim wrote to our mutual friend Kathy Kelly of the Voices for Creative Nonviolence and invited her to visit. Kathy, being the model peacemaker, accepted the invitation, and has been coming here regularly. It was Kathy who called me in April as I was traveling to speak in Wyoming and said to me matter-of-factly, "John, I need you to go to Afghanistan in December. Save these dates. We'll talk later!"

"OK, Kathy," I replied. "Whatever you say."

The youth come mainly from the village of Bamiyan, and all are victims of poverty and war. They attend various schools nearby but share every other aspect of life together, living in near-total poverty with few personal possessions. They continue to organize peace events here in Kabul, host internationals and study nonviolence. With Hakim's guidance, they're breaking new ground for peace in one of the world's harshest cultures of war.

Eventually, we took a side road toward a nondescript three-story building at the end of the street, which serves as their home and headquarters. Inside, they welcomed me warmly. We sat in a circle on the floor around a metal wood-burning heater and drank green tea, which is their welcoming custom. Afghanistan is known for its spectacular hospitality, and I sure experienced that today. Americans could learn a thing or two about hospitality from our Afghan brothers and sisters.

After 48 hours of travel with little sleep, I found a corner on the floor, rolled out my sleeping bag and rested. Later, I joined them for dinner. Again, we sat in a circle on the floor. A mat was rolled out and plates of beans, rice and bread were put out to share, along with green tea. They told me about their lives, their work and their hopes. In the last year in Kabul, they've held a peace walk and many other activities, and hosted many international visitors. But in the last few months, they've organized a woman's sewing class and cooperative and have begun to teach 50 children, most of them beggars on the street, so the

building is full of activity throughout the day. They meet constantly and try to make every decision together in consensus. Of course, nonviolence is still fairly new for them and not widely discussed in Afghanistan, so this remains a huge challenge as they transition from the culture of violence into the daily practice of nonviolence and mutual respect. But I am mighty impressed by these young peacemakers. What a sign of hope in this world of despair.

After dinner, they had a two-hour meeting to discuss the upcoming peace walk and ceremony to launch their "2 Million Friends" campaign, which is the main reason I'm here. As I wrote recently, they launched a website, saying that since 2 million Afghans have been killed in the last four decades in horrific warfare and occupation -- the Soviets in the 1980s, the civil war led by the warlords (who are now in government positions), the repressive Taliban rule, and now 11 years of U.S. war and occupation -- they want 2 million people from around the world to counter this history of violence by signing up as friends of the people and youth of Afghanistan. It's a marvelous peacemaking venture, which I hope everyone will join.

Dec. 5

I slept on the floor in 30-degree room, just like the youth, but the duvet the women's cooperative made -- 5 inches thick, much warmer than a down comforter -- kept me surprisingly warm.

"We know we will never live to see the results of our work for peace and nonviolence," one of the youths said to me as we sat in a circle for breakfast tea and bread, "but that is OK because this work is so important." I'm moved by each one of them -- their spirit, their struggle, their suffering, and their passion for peace. This week, they're taking their exams, but they agreed to meet with me one at a time for a conversation.

This morning, I met first with Faiz, a gentle 22-year-old student with black hair and a beard who lost both his parents and his brother from war and poverty.

"In my own study of Gandhi and nonviolence," he began, "I'm learning to become nonviolent, transparent and honest, and to face the truth of my own life. I'm gradually changing, and putting pressure on myself to change."

With that, he bowed his head and started crying. Hakim sat between us, to translate from Dari to English. As the silence lingered, Hakim cried, too. Their tears spoke volumes.

"I have observed the pain of the people, especially the children. Something needs to be done, but what? Our society claims to be Muslim, but it's so hypocritical since so many families, women and children need help. I'm very disturbed by what is happening in the name of Islam. I do not expect to see peace in my lifetime, but I believe in trying to help people live in peace, and I think a small group of young people living in a peace community is a good start. Young people need to learn entirely new values and not waste their lives seeking money, power and prestige as previous generations did. The youth have to grow if there is ever to be peace, so this is worth pursuing. I want to pursue the beautiful idea of nonviolence. I've learned that if people can't be honest about their violence and forgive one another, and learn to talk and negotiate, then there will be no way to resolve our ongoing violence. The wars will drag on. I hope to promote nonviolence in Afghan society."

"Life in Afghanistan is not good," 15-year-old Ghulami told me next. "My family has faced terrible poverty and a lack of education. People are barely surviving. Growing up, I felt that life is meaningless. There is no work. If Hakim had not invited me here, I would be a shepherd boy in the mountains. I'm in the seventh grade now, and happy to study so that one day I can be of service."

"The war has had a negative effect on everyone in Afghanistan," he continued. "It aggravates poverty. Children are hungry. Youth cannot study in peace. There is no work. People are psychologically damaged by the war. When my parents were getting married, right during the wedding, a bomb exploded, injuring many, including my mother, whose one arm remains limp and weak. But I'm happy to learn about peace and nonviolence. I'm learning that everyone is a human being, that no one is better than anyone else. I'm also learning to cook and to clean and to live in community with others."

What does nonviolence mean for you? I asked.

"To be nonviolent means you don't insult others, that you treat everyone equally, with respect. We have several basic principles as peace volunteers, mainly to be honest and true to one another and to try to love everyone."

Then, with a smile, he said, "I want to practice what Gandhi said: 'Simple living and high thinking.' "

What would you say to the youth in America? I asked.

"We are all the same," he replied. "We're all human beings, living under the same blue sky, and we shouldn't be prejudiced against anyone. We should all be friends, whether Muslims, Christians, Jews or whatever."

"Life is very difficult here," 15-year-old Ali said next. "There is a lot of suffering, a lot of prejudice. This makes me feel hopeless. It doesn't promise a good future. But this work of peace and nonviolence is changing me. I'm moving away from a life of violence even though I am not hopeful that I will see peace in Afghanistan in my lifetime. It will take many generations.

"Nonviolence, for me, means choosing a way of being honest and loving at all times, which means not stealing or cheating or killing. Once, when I visited back home, I spoke to a class of young kids about peace and nonviolence, and I felt I really connected with them. I hope I can continue to do that with others. To the youth of America, I would say: Don't go after material goods and wealth. Try to live as ordinary people and help others. Nonviolence is the only clean way of living."

After an afternoon rest, we shared dinner with five internationals who just arrived: Patrick, Emily, Ellen and Chris from Milwaukee and Culley from Australia. Afterward, we went around the room, and everyone said one word to describe how they felt, and then a few sentences to explain why they choose that word. What an uplifting circle of hope! We heard the words "peaceful," "happy," "eager," "energized," "grateful," "relaxed" and "friendly." I said I was "hopeful," which I confess, I did not expect to feel in Afghanistan.

"You give me hope," I told the peace community. "You dream of a nonviolent Afghanistan and pursue that dream by trying to be people of nonviolence and create a community of nonviolence. My friends and I in the U.S. dream of a nonviolent America, without war, bombs, drones, greed or nuclear weapons. We too are trying to become people of nonviolence. Together, we are working for a new nonviolent world that we may not live to see. You give me new hope to continue the struggle."

Dec. 6

Today is the 10th anniversary of the death of my friend Philip Berrigan, with whom I spent eight months in a tiny North Carolina jail cell. I awoke at 3 a.m., so I spent that quiet time remembering Phil, praying for Liz and his family and for peace for our poor world.

The morning session with Muslim women was one of the greatest experiences of my life. We internationals and most of the Peace Volunteers sat together in a room with the 23 conservative Muslim women of the sewing cooperative. We all sat on the floor against the walls, and the women spoke to us for hours about their lives and their duvet project. The Afghan Peace Volunteers raise money through Voices for Creative Nonviolence and pay the women a livable wage to make these massive, wonderful, thick quilts. Then the peace volunteers distribute them throughout the country to poor villages and refugee camps, where last year many small children froze to death. (Please contribute to this terrific Duvet Project!) Women in Afghanistan rarely leave their homes, so to go to a strange building where foreigners meet to learn a craft is a bold step. They hope to start their own business, to sell these quilts and make a living for themselves. That, too, is a hopeful sign.

Throughout the morning, these women dressed in black told us their stories and shared their suffering. It is risky for Muslim women to be in the same room with men, especially foreigners, so they took a real chance speaking with us.

"I lost my husband 20 years ago," one said, "and I have raised three children with no money. I'm so worried about them. One of them has mental problems. So I cry every day, all day. This is my way of coping."

The pain she felt was shared by everyone, and seems to be the common theme of Afghanistan -- immense pain and suffering from decades of war, greed, corruption and poverty.

"When I leave home in the morning to come here," another said, "I have to leave my little children at home alone, while my husband goes out to find work, and there is none. This is very stressful. We have no money."

"We want a better future for our children, that they can be educated," another said. "The school system in Afghanistan is very bad, and the few private schools are way too expensive for most people. The best way to help us is to help build a better education system. ... It's very difficult for us to go out of our homes. Our families are concerned that we will be killed by suicide bombers. And no one listens to our voices. We can't imagine a better future for our children. There is little hope for them. Some countries say they send aid, but where is it? We have never seen it. It all goes into the hands of the government leaders who buy homes in Dubai. Who will hear the voice of the people? We have so much pain in our hearts because no one will listen to us."

"War has had a negative effect on all the people," another said. "We are worried that the massacres and civil war will start again after 2014 (when most of the U.S./NATO forces leave). We hope that the focus could be on building a good education system here."

"How much longer will we have war?" another asked. "Afghans know that the U.S. government is here for its own interest, not the interests of the people. Who will listen to the voice of the people?"

We were deeply moved by these Afghan women. It was a privilege to be in their presence and to hear their heartbreaking cry for peace and the call to do what we can to end war and poverty.

"Wisdom lies among the people of Afghanistan, especially the women," Hakim told us later over lunch.

"After centuries of war, the male leaders tend to choose violence, but not the women. They are mainly concerned about food and children. We need to hear their stories and do what we can to help make peace come true."

That is what the Afghan Peace Volunteers are trying to do, and I'm so grateful to be here with them, to learn from them, the wisdom of peace.

In the midst of the darkness of war and poverty, they show me the Advent light of hope and peace.

The second part of this journal will be posted next week.

John Dear is in Afghanistan on a peacemaking mission for several weeks. He will lead a retreat, "Jesus the Peacemaker," April 5-7 in Pennsylvania. To see John's speaking schedule or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website. One of John's essays appears in the new book *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For*. His book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. John's talk at the 2011 Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire*. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings; Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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