



Letter from Afghanistan

Dear Friends,

February 2020

Greetings to all from Kabul, where we arrived amidst snow, sleet and freezing weather. This was our 7th visit to Afghanistan to work with the Border Free Community and the Afghan Peace Volunteers (APVs). The organization founded by Dr. Hakim Young, MD, focuses on creating peace and a spirit of nonviolence among youth who come from different tribal groups. During our time with the APVs we led 9 workshops with over 352 participants and offered 28 counseling sessions. Each visit has been a great learning experience for us as the youth share their challenges, hopes and dreams while living in a war zone.

Since the start of the war in 2001, more than 2,300 US troops have died in Afghanistan, and more than 20,000 have been wounded. Deaths of Afghan citizens are estimated to be over 32,000, with 42,000 opposition fighters also dead. President Ashraf Ghani claims that over 45,000 members of security forces have died since 2014. According to Amnesty International, "In the first nine months of 2019, more than 2,400 Afghan children were killed or wounded, making it the deadliest conflict in the world for children." In recent reports by the BBC, the Taliban claim to control over 70% of the country. With the current US-Taliban negotiations to end the violence, many Afghans, especially women, fear that there will be a return to Taliban control of the country along with the imposition of Sharia Law. The Taliban have refused to talk to the West-backed government in Kabul.

Afghanistan has one of the largest percentages of youth populations in the world with 65% of the country under 24 years of age. Due to their large number, youth have become a target for extremist organization recruitment efforts. In response, Afghan youth are speaking out about their experiences and are advancing dialogues that emphasize the need for peace and inclusion. According to one blog, "Extremists seek out young men and women in ways that appeal to their frustration with decades of conflict and injustice, the burdening expectations for young men to provide financially for immediate and extended family, and traditional gender roles. Often, extremist groups use young people's insecurities



Dr. Hakim Young, Pat Cane and George Horan with the APV coordinators and leaders



Hakim Young, Pat Cane and George Horan with students at Kabul University

to convince Afghan youth to join their ranks. The Taliban use both traditional and nontraditional forms of media to recruit and influence young people. Additionally, the Taliban and ISIS use violent methods such as kidnapping or attacking schools to recruit children. Young Afghans understand these tactics and many are refusing to be silent. Aiding youth is the United Nations, which has prioritized youth empowerment through the UNDP's Youth Strategy and UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). In

2018, UNAMA established a Youth Consultation Council to promote youth participation in Afghanistan's politics and society through education, vocational training, debate, and partnerships with local media networks. The Council creates a space for young people to discuss common goals and design initiatives to achieve peace. By addressing mental health, improving access to education for all young people, empowering women and girls, alleviating poverty, and increasing the amount of employment opportunities, the reasons why youth often embrace violent extremism can be challenged. Providing youth opportunities to speak up and participate in Afghanistan's political and social life is one key to improving the quality of life in Afghanistan, so this generation can pave the way toward future peace."

Against this backdrop of 19 years of war, the Afghan Peace Volunteers work for nonviolence, peace and possibilities for themselves and their country. In advance of our visits, the APV Psychology Committee chooses themes they want us to discuss. We always integrate Capacitar practices into the themes to give the youth tools to manage their lives. This visit we developed classes focused on: Team Spirit—working as a team rather than hyper-individuals; managing anger and strong emotions; how to reduce unhealthy and violent competition; how to build trust; how to overcome a persistently negative outlook. The themes give us insight into the social issues faced by the youth. As the APVs work to get their high school or university education, they are influenced by Western attitudes, such as unhealthy competition, egoistic attitudes and individualism, in contrast to their traditional communal and collective values. Hakim described how famous Afghan sportsmen now have armed bodyguards, because there have been threats and incidents of 'murder' to eliminate competition. The



Afghan Peace Volunteers celebrating the end of the Capacitar classes

theme requested by students at Kabul University was how to manage anger, with 70 young men and women participating in this class. It is always a joy to facilitate the different groups of youth who enthusiastically engage in discussion presenting their ideas. Often they comment that the class exchanges and Capacitar practices are changing their lives and giving them new perspectives for their future. These youth are the “bridge generation”, transforming old tribal social patterns that no longer work, to whole new ways of thinking and living.

During our time with the APVs we also led several classes for the 100+ street children who come to the center. According to UNICEF, more than 30 percent of school children are working on the streets in Afghanistan and are often their family’s sole breadwinner because their fathers or brothers have died or been disabled in the war. This means that more than 3 million children are not receiving an education. The APVs run a school to give the street children basic lessons in math, language, history, as well as peace studies. Some classes for the older street children also offer job skills to give them opportunities for generating income.

One of our classes was for parents of street children. Normally we offer a workshop just for the mothers, but because the APV promotional notice said “parents”, four men showed up to take the class. Most parents have very hard lives and little access to health care, so we taught them simple Acupressure Points for pain, stomach problems, headaches, and other health conditions. Having the men present really changed the dynamic, since most village meetings are of one gender. In this mixed class, the women appeared to be much more withdrawn and kept their burkas in place.

Besides workshops, we also offered 28 counseling sessions for those who needed to talk. Problems ranged from



Young women discussing how to work with strong emotions



APV youth considering how to deal with negative attitudes



Pal Dan Gum to release stress and balance the body



Street children learn Capacitar practices including Fingerholds, Switching and Acupressure for handling stress and pain



Street children practicing Capacitar Fingerholds

school stress, to serious personal trauma, beatings by family members and teachers, and arranged marriages. One young man had to return to university four times because his teacher never showed up for his thesis defense. Another young woman was caught in a marriage to a village man who had little education and was abusive and controlling.

Most Afghan families, especially those living in villages, see marriage as an alliance between two families, with contracts made while children are babies or very young. Marriage contracts are made within the tribal group. The challenge comes when youth fall in love and want to break the contract or marry outside of their tribe. In some cases, when women get an education and have a job that brings in income for the family, the contract can be broken without losing face.



Drawing personal Team Spirit Mandalas

Just after our arrival in Kabul, we learned that a young couple, who we have known as APV leaders for several years, were getting married the next day. They had already had a traditional Muslim ceremony with their families and the Imam, and were now having a Kabul celebration in one of the large wedding halls. We were invited, but Hakim and the couple warned us of the danger of going because suicide bombers currently target wedding palaces where hundreds or thousands of people gather to celebrate the newlyweds. In August 2019, a joyful gathering of over 1,000 guests “celebrating with hope and desire”, ended in carnage with 60 people dead and several hundred wounded. So instead, the APVs had a short gathering to congratulate the couple the day before their celebration. Following tradition after the big day, the bride went to the groom’s village to stay with his family for two months. The couple will then return to Kabul so the bride can resume her job as APV Coordinator.



APV bride and groom celebrating their future marriage

Each visit with Hakim and the APVs is full and rewarding, challenging us to greater consciousness and commitment to be part of the Afghan healing process. Capacitar will continue to walk in solidarity accompanying the Afghan Peace Volunteers and the people of Afghanistan.

With peace and blessings,

Pat Cane and George Horan

Capacitar Afghanistan Team