



Capacitar Letter from Afghanistan

Dr Hakim Young, George Horan, Pat Cane and Naser Lessani

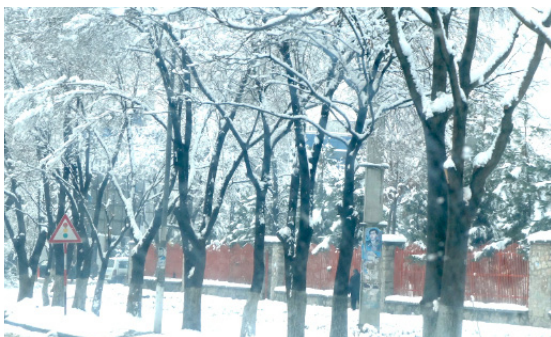
February 2019

Dear Friends,

Special greetings to you from Kabul, where we worked for the last week at the Borderfree Nonviolence Center with the Afghan Peace Volunteers. It was a valuable experience for us offering nine Capacitar workshops for nearly 70 university and high school youth, 110 street kids and 40 Afghan mothers of street kids. We also did individual counseling sessions for 20 people. Our time here has been both joyful and poignant, sharing the hopes and dreams of youth, encouraging them, as well as listening to the many challenges in their lives.

The day after we arrived it started snowing. The beauty of the snow covered the many scars of war, violence and desperation in the streets of Kabul. According to a new report from the United Nations, more civilians were killed in 2018 than at any time since records have been kept. One of the leading causes of the 3,804 civilian deaths, including 927 children, was suicide bomb attacks by anti-government groups. Over 500 civilians were also killed by the aerial operations of pro-government forces, for the first time on record. The top UN official in Afghanistan, Tadamici Yamamoto, said that in the last decade more than 32,000 civilians were killed and 60,000 injured. He noted: "The best way to stop the killings and maiming is to stop the fighting. That is why there is all the more need now to use all our efforts to bring about peace." The 2018 UN statistics represent an 11% increase in civilian deaths over 2017. The UN report came a day before the next round of talks to end the 17 year-long conflict between the US special envoy and Taliban negotiators in Qatar. But the Taliban so far have refused to hold formal talks with the Afghan government.

This was our fifth visit to Afghanistan to work with the Afghan Peace Volunteers as Capacitar trainers and counseling psychologists. With each visit we have seen a greater maturity and commitment among the youth to study and live with the principles of nonviolence. Prior to each visit the Peace Volunteers choose the topics they want us to explore with them. This time they requested the study of nonviolent communication; skills for mediators in conflict resolution; psychological first aid--what to do when someone gets angry, emotional or violent; and how to maintain and strengthen a good friendship.



Along with the topics we integrated Capacitar practices as ways for the youth to work with the different issues in their lives.

Intergenerational Differences

One of the most interesting topics we explored was intergenerational relationship building and exchange of culture in the family. Since most of the youth are the first in their families to get a high school or university education, there often are misunderstandings between the youth and their parents at the levels of customs, interests, traditions and religion. Many of the families live in villages where the social mores are from another century. So the youth discussed how to better communicate their new experiences with their parents and siblings. Naser, our program coordinator, shared how he explained to his father the reason why he is volunteering at the Borderfree Nonviolence Center. One of the pillars of Islam is service, so working with street kids and volunteering his time is a way to practice his faith as a Muslim. With this explanation in a religious context, Naser's father was able to understand and respect his decision.

We reflected on the very different world views of people living in a collective culture in contrast to those coming from an individualistic culture. Hussain, a young school teacher, said it is necessary to cut the "I" (the self) in half to respectfully talk with his parents who have only known a community-based reality and years of war and hardship.

One of the cultural realities that many of the youth face with their families is courtship and marriage. Traditionally the decision regarding engagement and marriage has been a family and a community responsibility, with contracts often made between families when children are quite young. We counseled a couple of



University students sharing their experiences



Afghan youth practicing active listening skills



Youth learning Fingerholds to manage emotions



young women who were being forced by their parents to marry someone who was either violent or who they disliked. The young women felt helpless and unable to go against their parents' will because of the shame this would bring to the family. One way that girls can legitimately be released from an engagement is by pursuing their education to gain an employable skill that brings honor and income to their families.

Another cultural challenge brought up by the youth is the way that many Afghans have traditionally settled their differences—by fighting or violence, especially between different tribal groups. Learning listening skills and how to mediate conflicts was a new experience for almost everyone. Together we reflected on how this generation of youth have the great challenge of building bridges from the traditional world view of their parents to create a healthier vision for the future of Afghanistan.

Healing the Trauma

On most days we met with individuals who asked to talk with us about their traumas. Several years ago a representative of the Ministry of Health noted that over 90% of Afghan people were traumatized. President Ashraf Ghani in an address to the US Congress said that Afghanistan was a mentally ill country. In contrast to the problems of youth in developed nations, the normal psychological development of young Afghans is impacted by a legacy of war, occupation, presence of the Taliban, extreme poverty and ongoing violence. Many of the youth we saw were dealing with some level of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Presenting problems included: surviving suicide bomb attacks; watching friends injured by the bombs; seeing bodies blown to bits and being unable to sleep because of nightmares; and dealing with memories of kidnapping and torture by the Taliban. None of these memories can be erased, since living with the ongoing threat of another suicide attack has become the norm. Everywhere in the streets of Kabul loom the military tanks, soldiers and police with assault rifles, guards with their weapons in front of buildings, and helicopters and surveillance blimps overhead. However, the basic Capacitar energy practices—Fingerholds, Emotional Freedom Tapping, Switching, and Acupressure Points for fear and stress—give the youth simple tools to handle the crises of each moment. With this “emergency kit” of practices, the youth are learning to live with resilience and to work for peace in a war zone.

Workshops for the Street Kids

On one of the days we led three short workshops with children who have to work in the streets selling various items to help support their families. Hakim said that there are now 117 street kids who come to the center to learn basic subjects as well as nonviolence skills and peacebuilding. The children were great fun to work with, although at times challenging, because many were unable to focus. When asked where they hurt, many of the children pointed to their heads or shoulders or stomachs. Acupressure Points for various conditions peaked their interest and quieted their spirits. Drum Massage brought squeals of laughter and delight.





When we taught Fingerholds, some of the kids pulled out their notebooks and started tracing their fingers, eager to learn. Other kids started to yawn or fall asleep, letting go of the stress of their young lives. When we asked how they felt with the Fingerhold meditation, some responded: “Happy!” “Peaceful”, “I feel light and floating!” At the end of class, we gave the kids homework to go and teach their mothers and friends what they had learned.

Mothers of the Street Kids

At the last minute we decided to give a workshop for the mothers because some of them had participated during our previous visits. When we walked into the crowded classroom of 45 women and a few small children, many waved and greeted us with their burkas flipped backwards so we could see their smiling faces. Two of the street girls sat near us and proudly said that they had taught their moms what they had learned! Out of respect we did not photograph the women but the joy of their faces remains in our hearts. Most of the women suffer from poor health, headaches, stomach problems, sore joints and painful backs, so the Acupressure Points gave some relief, empowering the women with what they could do for themselves. These women have gone through years of hardship and suffering, so the Fingerholds for dealing with their sorrow, anger and fear were of great benefit.



On the last day in his closing remarks, Naser spoke of his gratitude for the Capacitar ideas and practices that bring empowerment and hope to the people of Afghanistan. It is a great joy and privilege for us to work with Dr. Hakim Young, his team and the remarkable youth at this visionary center. In the midst of the chaos and violence everywhere in their country, the Borderfree Nonviolence Center is a place of light and hope awakening minds and hearts to create a future for Afghanistan.



With peace and solidarity,

Pat Cane and George Horan

Capacitar Afghanistan Team



Dr. Hakim Young empowering the street kids