

VOICES FOR CREATIVE NONVIOLENCE

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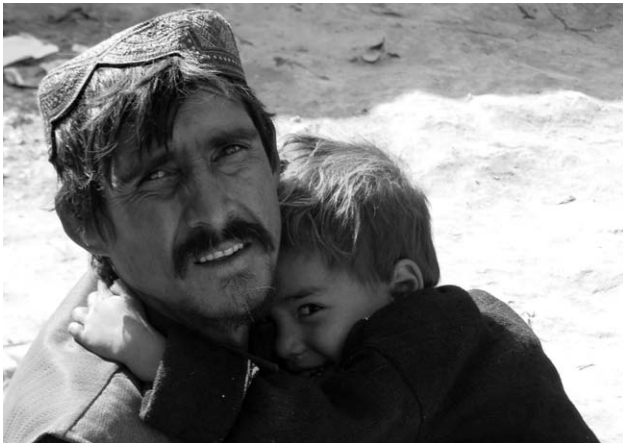
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May 2011

Dear Friends,

In March of 2011, twenty-eight international activists visited Afghanistan as guests of the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers and The Open Society, (a group of young Afghan artists dedicated to human rights advocacy).

The Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers had decided to observe the New Year holiday, (Nau Ruz), on March 21st, the first day of spring, by gathering in advance for an inter-ethnic walk. Flanked by police in riot gear, they bravely carried their banners through streets of Kabul. Our delegation joined them, two days later, to plant trees at a school in Kabul. That evening, we held a candlelight vigil commemorating young people who've been killed by wars in Afghanistan.



As part of that vigil, we read the names of 9 Afghan youngsters who were killed on March 1st, 2011, when a U.S. helicopter spotted them on a mountainside in the Kunar province where they were collecting wood for use as fuel. Here is a survivor's account, published in the New York Times on March 2nd:

The only survivor, Hemad, 11, said his mother had told him to go out with other boys to collect firewood because 'the weather is very cold now.'

'We were almost done collecting the wood when suddenly we saw the helicopters come,' said Hemad, who, like many Afghans, has only one name. 'There were two of them. The helicopters hovered over us, scanned us and we saw a green flash from the helicopters. Then they flew back high up, and in a second round they hovered over us and started shooting. They fired a rocket which landed on a tree. The tree branches fell over me and shrapnel hit my right hand and my side.'

The tree, Hemad said, saved his life by covering him so that he could not be seen by the helicopters, which, he said, 'shot the boys one after another.'

The next day, General Petraeus swiftly apologized. But two weeks later, a similar incident occurred in the same region when two children cleaning an irrigation ditch were killed by a U.S. aerial attack. And on August 26th, 2010, in the same area, six children collecting scrap metal on a mountainside were gunned down by a U.S. aerial attack.

What is the worth of an Afghan child's life in the minds of U.S. military brass? A February 23rd AP report tells about a meeting in President Hamid Karzai's palace which was convened to investigate claims that international troops killed scores of civilians in northeast Afghanistan, including children. Gen. Petraeus reportedly suggested that media reports and television footage showing severely injured children might be showing children who had been intentionally burned by their own parents. Then a coalition press officer, Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, tried to explain what General Petraeus actually meant:

"Gen. Petraeus never said that children's hands and feet were purposely burned by their families in order to create a CIVCAS (civilian casualty) event," Smith said. "Rather, he said that the injuries to the children appeared inconsistent with the types of munitions used and that the burns to their hands and feet may have been the result of discipline sometimes handed

out to Afghan children. Regrettably this is customary among some Afghan fathers as a way of dealing with children who misbehave." (AP 2/23/2011) Afghan officials were horrified by the notion that leading NATO figures believe Afghan parents boil and burn their children as a disciplinary measure.

In April, 2011, Der Spiegel released photos showing the mutilated corpses of unarmed Afghan civilians who were executed by a Stryker squadron accused of having gone on a three month killing spree.

After learning about these photos, a young photographer showed me his pictures of horsemen playing the popular sport called buzkashi which involves pulling apart the carcass of a slaughtered goat. The horsemen must be extremely strong in order to manage their horses and dismember the carcass. Repeatedly, Afghans have told us that they believe their country is like the goat as great powers within and beyond their land try to tear Afghanistan to pieces.

Please let us know if you would like any of the March-April 2011 delegation members to share their impressions with your community. Included in this newsletter are several reports and photos. The swift work of a network of activists from the U.S., Australia, and Germany enabled us to undertake this trip on rather short notice. We feel deeply grateful.

We've also been fortunate to collaborate with activists in several parts of the U.S. who are developing opposition to drone warfare. In New York State, the Upstate Coalition to Ground the Drones and End the Wars held a week of walks, rallies, and education events culminating in a demonstration outside the New York Air National Guard's base at Hancock Field. 170 people were gathered to protest the MQ-9 Reaper drones which the 174th Fighter Wing of the Guard has been remotely flying over Afghanistan, from Syracuse, since late 2009. 37 people were arrested. They intend to seek a jury trial and plead not guilty to charges of trespassing and obstruction of justice. Voices for Creative Nonviolence was well represented and looks forward to building on experiences from the Creech 14 trial to help raise awareness about drone warfare.

Other actions to protest drone warfare are being planned in Indiana, Wisconsin, Nevada, California, and Arizona. Please contact us for further information, and also let us know if you'd like to receive a copy of "Drone: Resisting Sanitized Remote-Control Death," a publication of the Creech 14 which is currently in draft form and/or if you would like to receive "Ground the Drones," an adaptation from the courtroom transcripts

of the trial of the State of Nevada versus the 'Creech Fourteen.'

Included in this newsletter are reflections from Cathy Breen who has spent two months traveling in Jordan and Syria, visiting with Iraqi refugees and helping communicate their stories while also assisting them with numerous practical concerns and acting as an advocate in their efforts to seek resettlement. Cathy has witnessed escalating fears and tensions in Syria as protests against the regime have been met with violent crackdowns.

Recently, Joshua Broliier returned from Syria after several months of studying Arabic. We've been grateful to have Joshua back with us, in Chicago, and to rely on his guidance during a very busy time at the Voices office. We've also been thankful for Mohamed Abdel-Magid's exceptionally gifted abilities as an administrator, analyst, and teacher. Mohamed will return to Minnesota in May where he plans to pursue plans for graduate school study.

In closing, we humbly suggest that you enjoy some time out to view videos created by the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers. The videos are available on their website: www.ourjourneytosmile. They'll put a gust of fresh wind in your sails.

Sincerely,

Mary Dean, Kathy Kelly, Gerald Paoli, Joshua Broliier, Mohamed Abdel-Magid, Brian Terrell, Jewell Gregory, Jerica Arents



Beyond Retaliation: Our Response to the Killing of Osama Bin Laden



This morning, a reporter called to talk about the news that the U.S. has killed Osama bin Laden. Referring to throngs of young people celebrating outside the White

House, the reporter asked what Voices would say if we had a chance to speak with those young people.

We'd want to tell them about a group of people who, in November of 2001, walked from Washington, D.C. to New York City carrying a banner that said, "Our Grief is not a Cry for War." Several of the walkers were people who had lost their loved ones in the attacks on 9/11. When the walk ended, they formed a group called "Families for Peaceful Tomorrows" to continually represent the belief that our security is not founded in violence and revenge.

Often, during that walk, participants were asked what we'd suggest as an alternative to invading Afghanistan. One response was that the U.S. and other countries could enact a criminal investigation and rely on police work and intelligence to apprehend the perpetrators of the attack. As it turns out, the U.S. discovered where Osama bin Laden was through those means and not through warfare. How have the past ten years of aerial bombardments, night raids, death squads, assassinations and drone attacks in Afghanistan benefitted the U.S. people? Did the carnage and bloodshed bring the U.S. closer to discovering the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden? Have we defeated terrorism or created greater, deeper hatred toward the U.S.?

In the past, President Obama has said that "we stand on the shoulders of giants like Dr. King, yet our future progress will depend on how we prepare our next generation of leaders." (Jan. 18, 2010). In a historic speech, "[Beyond Vietnam—A Time to Break Silence](#)," King said: "We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation. The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate. And history is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate."

In that same speech, King called for a neighborliness that goes beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation. We think of that call in light of experiences of a 2010 Voices delegation that visited a rural village in the central highlands of Afghanistan. They sat with women who were close in age to the young people who were celebrating outside of the White House last night. Asked if they had ever heard of a time when a large passenger plane had crashed into a tall building in the United States, the young women were puzzled. They had never heard of 9/11.

They live in a country where 850 children die every day, a country which the UN has termed the worst country in the world into which a child can be born, where the average life expectancy is 42 years of age.

The UN says that 7.4 million Afghans live with hunger and fear of starvation, while millions more rely on food help, and one in five children die before the age of five. Each week, the U.S. taxpayers spend two billion dollars to continue the war in Afghanistan.

Matt Daloisio, who co-coordinates the Witness Against Torture Campaign, sounded a note that we find far more authentic than triumphal celebration. "10 years," Matt wrote. "Over 6000 US Soldiers killed. Trillions of Dollars wasted. Hundreds of thousands of civilians killed. Tens of thousands imprisoned. Torture as part of foreign policy. And we are supposed to celebrate the murder of one person? I am not excited. I am not happy. I remain profoundly sad."



Holding Out for a Laugh

Cathy Breen



Dear Friends,

I want to laugh today. As the mystic Indian poet Kabir sang, "A whole body laugh, feeling God's poke in the ribs."

There is no lack of things that make me sad just thinking of them. An Iraqi man separated from his family for almost two years. The wife and four children left for the U.S. in June of 2009, but the father was denied on "credibility." For what reason? I challenge anyone to try and get the Dept. of Homeland Security to release this information to the family. His little son in Michigan, now 4 ½ years, has long since forgotten his dad's voice over the telephone. The family in the U.S. is trying another route to reunite the family, but the wait seems eternal. I hope to see the father tonight.

The recent meeting with the UNHCR, though discouraging in its prognosis for Iraq and its refugees, was helpful and clarifying. The news for Palestinians from Iraq is grim. I know some are waiting to hear the results of that meeting and I dread telephoning them today. I asked the UNHCR representative what I should

tell them. "Tell them there are no slots for them for resettlement." Though compassionate, the representative's voice was fraught with frustration.

A very small number of Iraqis have returned from Syria to Iraq this year, perhaps 50. Dawn Chatty, a reader in anthropology and forced migration at Oxford University writes: "The Iraqi refugees, unwilling to return and unable to emigrate further west or north, are in a perilous situation that needs to be recognized and addressed by the western powers who created this humanitarian crisis." She views their state as one of "protracted crisis."

In Syria alone there is a backlog of over 2,000 cases for U.S. resettlement to be processed due to new Homeland Security procedures. So many Iraqis I have met this trip, both in Jordan and Syria, are waiting for their security checks to clear. One young Iraqi in Amman who sometimes translates for me has had his medical tests four times already. The medical work up must be redone after each six-month period.

The projected figure for resettlement to the U.S. from Syria for the next year is over 10,000. In the UNHCR meeting we spoke of the economic recession in the U.S., and the serious ethical question of sending Iraqis into a situation where they will only suffer further hardship and humiliation. Some days ago I received an email from a trusted German friend of Voices who was with the UN in Iraq before the war. An Iraqi colleague of his who was resettled in Texas "found a hopeless situation with help that is not enough to live and not enough to die." His friend is not a young man. He was just told that next month, in May, U.S. financial assistance will cease. Our German colleague was aghast. How can this be? Who is addressing this situation?

I must close now, but I am holding out for that laugh today. "A whole body laugh, feeling God's poke in the ribs."



Our Demand Must Be "US Troops Out of Afghanistan Now!"

Brian Terrell

Given the fears and uncertainties of what might befall Afghanistan upon the withdrawal of US and NATO troops, is it responsible for American peace activists to demand that our government bring our troops home now? I believe that it is urgent and that it is crucial that we do.

The future of Afghanistan cannot be settled by the US peace movement anymore than by the US State Department or the Department of Defense. Our positions on the war and occupation there need to be informed by listening to Afghans and not solely by our own convictions. I traveled to Afghanistan in December for three weeks, participating in a Voices for Creative Nonviolence delegation that was hosted by the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers. From the many Afghans and foreigners who live and work there, we heard varied opinions on what the withdrawal of US troops would mean on the ground.

What support that we heard for a continued US military presence there was always tempered by deep concerns that the occupation is clearly settling in for a long haul. We heard no unqualified support for the US military presence- even for those closely tied to Afghanistan's present government and who want the troops to stay, the occupation is at best a temporary expedient, a lesser evil only in comparison to the fulfillment of their worst nightmares. Those who fear the aftermath of a quick US/NATO withdrawal are also outraged by the night raids, the airstrikes and the civilian casualties that the occupation inflicts on their people.

The Afghans who call for a quick end to the US/NATO occupation are not so naïve as to believe that their country's problems will end there and neither should we indulge in such naïveté. The end of foreign occupation will be a necessary if painful beginning of a process to rebuild civil society after 30 years of war. As former parliamentarian Malalai Joya insists, "The US and NATO occupy my country under the name of all the beautiful banners of democracy, women's rights, human rights. And for this long time, they shed the blood of our people under the name of war on terror... It is better (for the US and NATO) to leave Afghanistan, then it is easier for us to fight one enemy instead of two."

The most urgent demands for withdrawal seem to come from those who, like Malalai Joya who during the years of Taliban rule carried books hidden in her burqa while teaching in an underground school for girls, suffered greatly under the Taliban and who might also be most vulnerable to the upheaval that might follow that withdrawal. The young men of the Bamiyan based Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers who accompanied us are all survivors of the attempted ethnic cleansing of their home district by the Taliban. Most were internal refugees during those years and witnessed the killing of family members, yet it is from this group that comes the incessant demand, "we want you out!"

As a society we are more ready to take risks to fight a

war than to risk for peace. Perversely, the inevitable risks incurred by war making are deemed acceptable, even if regretted, but the possibility of any risk attached to peacemaking renders peace impractical. Daniel Berrigan grieves, "We cry peace and cry peace, and there is no peace. There is no peace because there are no peacemakers. There are no makers of peace because the making of peace is at least as costly as the making of war." These courageous Afghan young people are among the few willing to pay the cost required for peace and we should accept their challenge to join them.

We need the courage, too, to take an honest look at what the presence of US troops really means to Afghanistan, lest reservations over withdrawal have foundation in residual delusions of American beneficence. When President Obama released his "December Review" of the situation in Afghanistan, I read it from our guest house in Kabul and was struck by the apparent dissonance of Obama's assurance that the US/NATO operations were "on track" and "achieving our goals." International institutions, nongovernmental organizations, the Red Cross, UNICEF, World Food Program, even the US National Intelligence Estimate leaked the day before the president spoke, all confirmed what we had been hearing and seeing from the broken streets of Kabul, that the security and human and political situation in Afghanistan was spiraling out of control.

President Obama's optimistic assessment of the occupation is actually reasonable unless one accepts the superstition of America's good intentions in the region. If the intention is to maintain and promote in Afghanistan a permanent environment of violence, confusion, distrust and fear, then it can be said that the US presence there is on track. The occupation is meeting its goals if these include the creation of an atmosphere there so poisonous that a civil society intent on meeting the needs of the Afghan people, rather than allowing the nation's wealth to be plundered by foreign corporations can never be nurtured.

Schools built, clinics staffed, roads paved by US and NATO armies are widely reported and might "win the hearts and minds" of Americans and so blunt criticism of the war, but they are not convincing to Afghans. Referring to the recent surfacing of photos depicting the murder and abuse of civilians by US troops, Malalai Joya writes, "I must report that Afghans do not believe this to be a story of a few rogue soldiers. We believe that the brutal actions of these 'kill teams' reveal the aggression and racism which is part and parcel of the entire military occupation. While these photos are new, the murder of innocents is not."

It is difficult to argue with the many Afghans who believe that the recent surge of civilian deaths and the callousness of US responses prove a deliberate policy of targeting their children. Leading proponent of nonviolence in Afghanistan and independent member of their legislature, Dr. Ramazon Bashardost, said "These killings must be stopped or the people will rise against the foreigners and we will stand by them."



Along with immediate withdrawal, we need to be demanding reparations for Afghanistan, as opposed to the "aid" that has evaporated at the rate of billions of dollars over the past nine years. Noam Chomsky, in a telephone interview with our delegation, explained that distinction, saying that along with Russia and Pakistan, the US owes "apology and reparations" to Afghanistan. "They have played a miserable role in destroying Afghanistan and should be responsible for doing whatever they can to help the Afghan people overcome the consequences of these interventions and atrocities. Again I stress that doesn't mean aid, that

means reparations. Aid sounds like something we give out of our good nature or good will. Reparations means what we are responsible for providing because of the extreme damage we have caused.”

Some reservations over making the demand for immediate withdrawal seem predicated upon an absurd premise that the peace movement in the US has the clout to actually make that happen. It is as if some believe that the US government could be persuaded by our marches, demonstrations, petitions and blockades and concede to our demands and pick up and leave tomorrow. While I sincerely wish that this were possible, I am confident that our demand will not lead to a precipitous withdrawal and the consequences that some fear would come in its wake.

Even though the demand “US Troops Out Now!” is not immediately achievable we should insist on no less than this. It might seem futile to demand the impossible, but the real futility lies in US citizens’ pleas for a responsible time-line for withdrawal. History shows that US troops will not leave Afghanistan one year or even two years after a president pledges that they will be brought home in one year. The admittedly patient process of bringing the troops home will not begin in earnest until the American people, in our words and actions, communicate that not one more day of this bloody and hopeless war can be tolerated. Accepting the continuation of the war for three more years or even one more year is to accede to an indefinite continuation of the occupation. So long as the American people can tolerate even one more day of war, the war will continue ad finitum.



With Children Like Your Own

We’d like to draw your attention to a new book of poetry by David Smith-Ferri, a long-time member of Voices for Creative Nonviolence, who traveled with VCNV to Afghanistan in October. Entitled *With Children Like Your Own*, the book contains 120 poems and is over 200 pages long, and it begins with a beautiful Foreword by Kathy Kelly. The poetry in this book is written out of direct experience with people in Afghanistan and with Iraqi refugees in Jordan. Many of the poems are written in the voice of Afghan and Iraqi people David met, and the book is filled with direct quotes.

Because of this, the poems draw us in, and through them we come to know these people, not as hapless victims of war, but as strong, courageous, and caring. And it is through their example that we can see a way out of the darkness of war. In her Foreword,

Kathy writes, “*With Children Like Your Own* calls us to envision a world where people everywhere enter the metaphorical listening tent to answer invitations to talk and listen and, through these means, find their way out of a violent present into a peaceful future, through the darkness into the dawn.” We invite you to listen to these poems.

Thanks to the generosity of the publisher, Marcia Gagliardi of Haley’s Publishing, all proceeds from the sale of go directly to support the work of VCNV.

You can purchase a signed, inscribed copy of the book by sending us a check for \$20 (\$16 plus \$4 shipping) made out to VCNV. Please put “poetry” in the memo line and allow three weeks for delivery.





CONCERNED ABOUT AFGHANISTAN?

What you can do:

Organize a group of people to view Afghan Youth Peace Volunteer videos located at the websites Our Journey to Smile: ourjourneytosmile.com and Live Without Wars: livewithoutwars.org. View videos and talk about impressions of Afghan youths and their friends. Also, feel free to check out www.youtube.com/user/ourjourneytosmile.

Share the Wikipedia entry for Dr. Ramazon Bashardost (<http://ramazanbashardost.com/spip.php?article42>), brief video footage of an interview with him (ourjourneytosmile.com/blog/), as well as an excerpt about him from the *New York Review of Books* (October 28, 2010) <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/oct/28/war-taliban/?pagination=false>. You can also use excerpts from Voices for Creative Nonviolence interviews with Dr. Bashardost (vcnv.org) and invite friends to become familiar with his views regarding nonviolent options for Afghanistan's future.

Form a support group for a potential traveler to Afghanistan. Contact Voices for Creative Nonviolence for a suggested future traveler. Support groups would help publicize the traveler's aim in visiting Afghanistan, circulate the traveler's notes, photos and posted articles while he or she is away, assist with practical concerns while the traveler is away from home, and help arrange speaking engagements and/or media upon return home. Support group could also assist with fundraising for flights and, while the traveler is away, accommodations.

Organize a high school, university or peace group to participate in a Skype phone call with the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers. Contact Doug Mackey at dougwmackey@gmail.com.

Organize a group to participate in the next equinox Skype-athon with the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers. To assist with and to participate in a call contact Doug Mackey at dougwmackey@gmail.com. Additional information about calls can be found at ThePeoplesJourney.org.

Visit the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers' Facebook page and share it with your friends: <http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/Youth-Peace-Volunteers/206186386153>

Follow Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers on Twitter.

Hold a vigil or demonstration.

Organize an event with David Smith-Ferri on his new book of poetry *With Children Like Your Own*, and/or help purchase and distribute copies of the book. The poems focus on encounters with Iraqis and people in Afghanistan who've endured siege and war. For more information, contact David Smith-Ferri at dsmithferri@gmail.com.

Host a film festival in your community and invite people to view films made by young Afghan filmmakers. Call the VCNV office (773.878.3815) for more information about obtaining the films.

Set up a meeting with your elected officials to let them know that you oppose the war in Afghanistan. Visit www.peace-action.org/ for more information about lobbying.

Encourage local Iraq and Afghan Veterans for Peace to become familiar with the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers.

Form a study group to learn Dari and/or Pashto.

Collect materials for a Peace Resource Center in Bamiyan, including artwork, posters, quilts, books, t-shirts, pamphlets, videos, audiobooks and other items related to nonviolence, peacemaking and ending wars. Contact Voices for information about collection sites in the United States: 773.878.3815; 1249 W. Argyle St, Chicago, IL 60640.

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MAY, 2011 NEWSLETTER

I Cannot Hear the River Singing March, 2011

David Smith-Ferri

Eleven-year-old Hemad speaks

I
We left our village together in the dark
stars thick overhead.
Ten of us
all from the same village
following ancient footpaths
climbing along creeks into the mountains.
A thin blanket of silence lay over the Pech Valley
the only sounds feet and hooves crunching
our breath puffing.

II
We didn't know ourselves apart from that silence
and the vast spaces our mountains held in their hands
and a limitless sky above
leaning over us like a mother.

III
We'd known each other since before memory.
We liked being together.
In the mounting uncertainty of life in our village,
it was a comfort.

IV
Unarmed, leading our donkeys along the path,
we could not be mistaken for bandits, thieves, militants.
No one could see us for anything but what we were,
a group of boys awoken before dawn
and forced out under the stars by poverty and cold.

V
We'd done this hundreds of times.
Every rock and plant knew us.
In an ancient language,
the river sang songs of water locked in ice

and sunshine setting it free,
of Afghanistan's past and future,
and we thought we heard it murmur our names.
At night, as we slept,
these were the waters that invaded our dreams
and carried us away.

VI
But that day in early March
something else came to carry us away.
Something the music of the waters could not defend against.
A threat even its magic could not diffuse.

VII
Arriving, we spread out like a hand over the mountainside.
Like fingers we combed the ravines,
bending and rising
foraging for sticks and branches
and piling them.
We trusted the trees and the soil.
We leaned against rocks to eat our lunch
and lay on the bare ground to nap.

VIII
We had come back together and were preparing to leave
when the helicopters flew overhead
and hovered above us.
Two of them,
so loud they drowned the sound of the water.
We looked up
and before the bullets struck us,
before the missiles tore through trees and exploded,
an instant before my friends were shredded and scattered
like paper,
we saw a green flash.
It was the last light they saw.
Now it is the light I wake to in the morning
and the last thing I see at night.
And I cannot hear the river
singing.