

YOUNG LEADERS PEACEBUILDING RETREAT

Dharma Drum Mountain Center

Pine Bush, New York

October 25-28th, 2006

OVERVIEW:

From October 25-28th, the Global Peace Initiative of Women (GPIW) held a four-day youth peacebuilding retreat at the Dharma Drum Mountain Retreat Center in Pine Bush, New York. Approximately 80 young leaders, who have a commitment to global peacebuilding and conflict resolution, or work in a related field, were invited to participate in the dialogue, which covered the root causes of regional and communal conflict. The Dharma Drum Mountain Foundation sponsored and hosted the GPIW Young Leaders Peacebuilding Retreat in an effort to support young adults in deeper exploration of environmental and social issues, as well as challenges to global peace.

The retreat participants represented 35 countries from around the world: Afghanistan, Angola, Cameroon, Canada, Chad, the Congo Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Gabon, Germany, Ghana, Honduras, India, Iran, Israel, Japan, Korea, Lebanon, Madagascar, Mexico, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Palestine, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Taiwan, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Vietnam, and Zambia.

The young adults at the retreat, many of whom would attend the United Nations Global Youth Leadership Summit at the UN Headquarters in New York City, (October 29-November 1) were joined by spiritual mentors and healers who helped to set a framework for the retreat discussions. The retreat began with a welcome by Ven. Mae Chee Sansanee, who greeted the youth with serenity and words of compassion setting the tone for the days to follow. The dialogues were conducted in world café style, which facilitated small group interaction and intergenerational discussions. By taking a comprehensive approach to peacebuilding, the retreat agenda addressed the impact of conflict on youth and conflict resolution from many themes: i) Understanding and Practicing Peace, ii) Tapping inner resources for rebuilding and renewal, iii) How to protect and treat the spiritual environment and iv) How gender balance can bring us closer to peace. There were also special programs; such as the nature walks led by Robert Chastin, a Cherokee leader whose wisdom of nature taught the youth how to have a deeper connection with their surroundings. Some of the youth coming from conflict countries found these peaceful walks to be rare and special experiences. There was also a fire ceremony led by His Holiness Swami Chitananda Saraswati that offered a symbolic meaning of renewal for the youth present.

The retreat established a network of young people committed to developing community and individual partnerships around peacebuilding and from this emerged the creation of the GPIW Young Leaders Peace Council. Under the leadership of Dena Merriam, the Council's first mission is to support a delegation of young peacebuilders in Sudan to convene young Sudanese in their effort to build the Sudan Youth Peacebuilding Dialogue (SYPD), the goal is to create a platform for young peace and development practitioners in Sudan to discuss challenges for youth

and to address these issues in a spirit of collaboration. The initial stage of the SYPD will take place in Kenya in late January 2007.

The Council has also committed to establishing a formal structure that would allow a support network to give rise to programs and partnerships led by the young leaders council members.

The retreat participants who went on to Global Youth Leadership Summit at the United Nations brought with them the concerns expressed by their peers at the Retreat and the understanding of the role of peacebuilding in development. The last day of the UN Global Youth Summit, the Global Peace Initiative of Women invited many UN delegates to reflect on their experience in New York and how they would like to the Young Leaders Peace Council to move forward. A significant number of participants from the Middle East region also attended the meeting, and have since expressed interest in joining the Council with hopes of doing a similar project in the Middle East.

RETREAT HIGHLIGHTS

WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS:

-Led by Ms. Judy Rodgers and Master Sheng Yen.

The Retreat began with a special address from Master Sheng Yen, spiritual teacher and founder of Dharma Drum Mountain. He welcomed the group to the Dharma Drum Retreat Center and hoped that their surroundings for the next couple of days would serve as the right atmosphere for their discussions on peace and preparation for the Global Youth Leadership Summit (GYLS). Master Sheng Yen then spoke about the GYLS and its main purpose in tackling Millennium Development Goal 1 – Poverty. He spoke specifically about the importance of cultivating Inner Peace and the connection it has to the world. He advised that in order to tackle poverty, we should start by keeping ourselves out of poverty by cultivating spiritual contentment with less greed. Meaning that by being less greedy and content in spirit with what we have, we can help contribute more effectively to the fight against poverty and prevent us from allowing greed to feed into conflict.

Lastly, he advised the group to reflect on and recognize the causes of poverty. For example wars, conflicts, and natural disasters displace and separate families, harm and exploit natural resources, reverse development and ultimately throw people into poverty. Recognizing the causes of poverty will also help people to realize that providing material goods is not a long-term solution, because spiritual contentment is also essential in creating lasting peace.

UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICING PEACE:

-Led by Ms. Dena Merriam and Mr. Olara Otunnu

The first session at the Peacebuilding Retreat was conducted on the topic of peace, how we understand and practice peace.

Dena Merriam spoke first about the need for a *transformation* in individuals, meaning that people should be able to drop their identities (when they are the source of conflict), in order to view themselves and others simply as human beings. She also spoke of the need to have compassion and the ability to feel for one another, which can be achieved by building relationships.

Olara Otunnu began by pointing out that we are in a world of conflict and this is the first challenge to practicing or bringing peace. He suggested that the best way to bring about peace making is by *preventing wars*. He mentioned factors that give rise to conflict, such as: imbalances between groups, which involve tensions between a center and periphery group; using diversity to prevent unity and the struggle for power, which encourages or enables groups to divide and conquer one another. Lastly, he cautioned the group to realize that there are often individuals or groups of individuals who wish to lead and cause conflict and so they should be aware of the power in individual action, engagement and/or responsibility.

Mr. Otunnu then proposed a solution to dealing with conflict. He emphasized the importance of having a process, but also having a solid foundation based on *values*, especially when trying to maintain peace in the aftermath of conflict. When a conflict is instigated by values and beliefs, Mr. Otunnu pointed out that one cannot return to status quo, but must transform or eliminate the source of conflict in a society to prevent it from happening again. Leaders also need to be heartbroken and there must be the recognition of sins and the need for repentance. This can then be translated into “Truth Seeking” and “Reconciliation- Accountability”.

DARWIN’S NIGHTMARE:

A sub-theme of the Peacebuilding Retreat was the environment and having peace with nature beyond our interactions with human beings. A highlight of the Retreat was the viewing of the documentary film, *Darwin’s Nightmare*, about the introduction of the Nile Perch in Lake Victoria in Africa and its impact on the communities in Tanzania that rely on the lake for employment and food. Afterwards Olara Otunnu, who is from Uganda, another country that borders Lake Victoria, led the group in a discussion.

One of the main ideas that came out of the film was the connection between the consumer and supply chain and educating both ends of the chain. From interviews with the fishermen, factory owners, pilots, the security guard and other members of the local fishing communities, the film demonstrated the simple desire of human beings to make a living, provide for their families and survive. It also illustrated how one’s personal actions and desires can contribute to a cycle of destruction for others, such as poverty, prostitution, the spread of HIV/AIDS, unemployment, conflict and in this case, the destruction of the natural biodiversity of Lake Victoria. The film showed audiences that everyone plays a role and should take personal responsibility as a consumer and supplier, because no one expected the experiment of the Nile Perch would have such an enormous and negative impact on so many people.

Darwin’s Nightmare also touched on the unfair distribution and exploitation of natural resources in Africa. Although there was an abundance of fish, very few people in the fishing villages were able to eat the fish because it was being exported to Europe as an expensive delicacy. Telling

parts of the documentary were the interviews with the factory owners and the pilots who were indifferent to their role in the situation at first and the fact that there was a famine in the Tanzania and people were starving. They were just doing their jobs. At one point, one of the European pilots said that “Africa bringing life, and food to Europe”. Another underlying issue was the support and facilitation of the illegal arms trade when these kinds of situations exist and how they connect to one another.

In the group discussion afterwards, a delegate pointed out that the same could be said of the scramble for other natural resources such as gold, oil, diamonds and timber in Africa and other developing regions by developed countries. When asked how they would deal with these problems and take action, delegates pointed to the governments, the army, and even the United Nations. Delegates encouraged one another to work with their governments, challenge companies and the private sector and take a grassroots approach for individual action and movement to get their message heard. Delegates of the Summit were then encouraged to track what they are currently doing, and urged to take a closer look at Globalization, where one can see what is happening in other parts of the world, while also becoming aware of how they may actually be affecting the other side of the world without knowing it. The notion of it being better to *prevent* than *cure* or cause *relief* was then identified, promoting education, raising awareness, and mobilizing others.

The film also prompted delegates to ask questions such as *who* the decision makers are, *when* decisions are made, and *who* benefits from these decisions? Delegates then realized the importance in following up, as well as the importance of holding people accountable for their actions.

LETS TALK PEACE:

-Led by Ms. Jane Little and Mr. Eugene Nyuydine Ngalim

The film documentary “*Let’s Talk Peace*” was produced by CAMYOSFOP, conceived by Ngalim Eugene, Executive Director and Patience Elango, Press and Information Secretary of CAMYOSFOP, who also directed the production of the documentary.

The 22-minute video documentary was shown during the Peace Retreat. *Let’s Talk Peace* propagated the notion of peace by demonstrating the catastrophic consequences of armed conflicts, with glaring examples from Rwanda, Sudan and other conflict affected areas in the world. The documentary ends with an example of a conflict resolution process between Cameroon and Nigeria over the Bakassi Peninsula. ‘Symbols of peace’ in the documentary included Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Junior, Mahatma Ghandi, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Kofi Annan and Presidents Olusogun Obassajo of Nigeria and Paul Biya of Cameroon, who have all advocated for peace during difficult moments.

Delegates participated in a discussion afterwards led by Jane Little, retreat mentor and a BBC reporter and Eugene Ngalim. The use of graphic images such as those from the genocide in Rwanda and war torn areas in Africa was a topic of the discussion. Delegates debated on the pros and cons of these types of movies and video documentaries because of the impact they can have and how they can be rightly used to serve the cause.

HEALING AND CONCILIATION:

-Led by Professor Amir Al-Islam and Ms. Leila Atshan

The process of peacemaking after conflict is quite complex because not only is there often significant physical damage to infrastructure and economies, but one also has to deal with the emotional damage people suffer as a result of conflict and violence and so a session was held on healing and reconciliation.

Professor Amir Al-Islam began by speaking about leadership and the importance of a retreat of young leaders engaging in peacebuilding. He spoke of the enormous task ahead and what it means to be a leader and how to lead strategically in order to meet goals, not because of personal satisfaction but because of the state of urgency in this time of crisis. He warned that it takes more than desire and commitment to an issue to become an effective leader and that the delegates should not squander this opportunity and do nothing, but take full advantage of the retreat to really focus on strategic leadership in peacebuilding. He also gave examples from his own life experiences in the United States growing up as an African American during the civil rights movement and becoming a Muslim and seeing the obstacles people face every day in his work with disadvantaged urban youth. He used these examples to encourage the group to persevere against all odds and to seek justice and to have compassion as leaders.

Ms. Leila Atshan also spoke from her personal and professional experience as a blind, Palestinian woman and a professional psychologist and group facilitator. She said that in order to heal others, you also have to work on healing yourself first and one way of doing this was through expressing one's emotions like crying. She urged all the delegates to think of a moment or experience in their lives that had changed them or guided them to the point where they are right now at the retreat. She challenged the delegates to think about and reveal what guides them, inspires them, gives them energy and passion to do what they do?

This session was especially powerful because the personal stories shared by the mentors had opened the floor for delegates to do the same. They did so in large groups and then broke up into smaller groups where they listened and shared pivotal moments in their lives. This exchange enabled delegates to develop trust in one another and discover meaningful things in common.

POST-RETREAT AND UN SUMMIT **NEXT STEPS AND GUIDELINES FOR PEACEBUILDING.**

Suggestions and comments from the Youth:

- 1) Support each other and stand with youth from conflict regions (i.e. Sudan Youth Peace Dialogue will include representative from conflict countries/ Young Leaders Peace Council)
- 2) Engage more North American youth in peace building efforts because of the strength of the US in influencing international policy.

- 3) Engage decision makers at the political level, Young congressmen/women such as Senator Barak Obama
- 4) Use the media to increase awareness about peace building efforts and use it as a tool for peace (i.e.: Media and peace conference in Bali, January 2007. Interested participants contact Asha Sehgal).
- 5) Become better informed about the political process and policy (i.e. Form a strong lobby group or coalition in the US and other countries)
- 6) Explore ways to use the media for peace.
- 7) Create a media watch/ think tank/ peace forum
- 8) Assemble a delegation to attend the UN General Assembly that can articulate and convey the peace-building message and goals to the UN member states.
- 9) Be more professional, strategic and organized.
- 10) Find a way to support NGOs financially.
- 11) Be models of goodwill
- 12) Select group who works on issues and creates database of information
- 13) Progress from talking to action and advocacy
- 14) More focus on the grassroots
- 15) Start action plans in respective countries and share with the group in a few months.
- 16) Follow up with the network
- 17) Follow up!
- 18) Follow up!
- 19) Follow up!

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