

SHA

2nd October, 2015

My name is Sha Sarwari. I come from Afghanistan. I belong to a Hazara ethnicity - one of the minorities in Afghanistan. And I came to Australia 15 years ago by boat as a refugee. I spent about 7 months in Curtin Detention Centre in Western Australia.

Can you describe what peace means to you?

Peace to me... well, I think for me peace is not just living in an environment where there's no war, no fighting going on or conflict. Because as long as one can think, you cannot be in peace - you are always in conflict. If you are not in a conflict zone or a war zone and you're away living in a peaceful coherent society then you are in conflict with yourself. So for me peace is... first of all peace is to be able to think freely, to breathe freely, and to be able to reflect on yourself and to be able to reflect on your surroundings, rather than just surviving.

How important is peace to you?

Peace is very important for me because there are moments when I'm in peace. I'm not always in peace. There are moments that I think my mind stops and there is nothing that I'm thinking about. Those moments are when I'm working and making

art. Those moments are very special because if you could live a day like that, that would be like living forever I think, because in those moments you really get out of this world, you're busy. Maybe the things you're making are not important but it takes you away from the troubles of your thoughts and your surroundings, so being able to taste that and recognise that is a peace for me, it's very important.

Is it linked to other values and other conditions?

In terms of values do you mean religion?

Yes - practices, values, beliefs.

When I was back home, it was linked sometimes with my practice of religion. Like when I was praying, I would be satisfied and appeased that I had performed my duty. I haven't prayed for the past 15 years, since before coming here. I started questioning the practice. Does it make any difference? There should be more practical things done. Practical acts that achieve something to better our society, other than just standing and uttering words and hoping that things will change. In that regard, I think it is important, because to bring relative peace where there is no

war, one should act. And sometimes I do think that I shouldn't be in Australia. I should be back home. I should be standing with the people who have struggled and are living through the confronting obstacles of war. I think I could do more there. Not to say that it's not important to do things here, but here I think the platform is set and society is going in a direction where they can stop. If something happens, they can stop it. But back home, there's no structure, the fabric of society is broken and it requires ideas, it requires action, not violent action but strategic action to plant seeds so that they grows. And in that regard, in those conditions - can I go back there? Should I go back there? Then there is the thought of losing your life. But then when you look back in history I think people that were very important in terms of manpower or intellect were very precious people, valuable people. They sacrificed their lives and stood for change. So I haven't decided yet to go back - there are seeds, thoughts in my mind. If I go back, where to start from, what should I want to do?

Has the meaning or the significance of peace changed for you over time? Maybe you have already described that when you described your move away from religion, or are there other ways that peace has changed its meanings for you? It sounds like it has become more important in some ways.

When you live with a belief, especially a very blind belief - I would say I think beliefs most of the time are blind - if there is no question involved and you just believe, it's blind. It doesn't change anything around you. It's just static. We have a saying that anything that is static creates a problem. Like static water can become full of germs and diseases. But when you think and question things then you change. There is not just burning desire that my point should be accepted or people should respect me because I believe and my beliefs should be respected. You question things, you put your point, you question your point, again and again and you try to reform it so it is not offensive. It's not destructive, it's coherent and it is somewhat beneficial.

So is living a peaceful life an active thing? Is peace an active thing?

Well it depends person to person, but for me it is an active thing because it is not just surviving, it is building. You're thinking, You have the chance to sit and think and look around you at what's going on. But when you're in a war zone or a conflict zone, the only thing you can think about is survival and that can make you destructive, rather than to create, or preserve, or do good things. It makes you destructive because the instinct of survival of the fittest gets into you and you want to survive even if you have to kill someone. But when you are in a peaceful environment, you start to think: What can I change? What should I do? You start to question your own actions. You start to question other people's actions and start to find an outcome that serves both you and the people that come in the future, the future generations.

Do you think that there are different kinds of peace? Do you think there's a difference between personal peace and social peace?

Yes, I think so. Personal peace is to come to terms with yourself. For example, coming from a different society and living in a different culture there are ways and

norms that you are not aware of and you have to let some things go and accept some other things in order to live peacefully with yourself. And in a way it relates to the society as well because when you do that you are creating a coherent environment, you're respecting the new culture. You are also trying to infuse your own culture because you cannot let go everything, you have to have things from the past in order to live.

Do you think peace is best found alone or do you think peace is best found with others? How do you make peace with yourself?

There are things that you can't always share with other people. Like there are things that are maybe too personal for you. For me getting peaceful with myself is to try and do things with my family, be somewhat proud of me, that I don't do anything that would hurt their feelings.

Both of them have their own place. In terms of society, there is a different level of peace. Within yourself there is a different level of peace when you dig deep with things that bother you. You have to sit and be in conversation with yourself and find the answer. And some way express it to people that understand you. Then the

peace that is achieved with others is to engage in conversation, like in debate, on the issues that is bothering or clashing within society. You have to talk it over all the time so that something comes out of it and ... I don't know.

Face it?

Yes, face it. It's a give and take.

Do you think Australia is a peaceful place?

I'm stressed with living in an environment where we're bombarded with media at every turn. We face news, we face things that bother you internally. In that way it's hard. Of course, if you shut yourself away from society, you don't care and you're just living and shopping. To a degree you are at peace. But if you start questioning there are always burning issues that you want to be involved in. In terms of war - of course there's no war [here]. We are at war and that also builds anxieties. Like recently when I went back to Afghanistan, that was the first time. I had this in the back of my mind and I even had this discussion with my wife, "What should we do if we come back to the airport and they stop us and say where have you been?" And if they deport us?". So things like that

do bother you. There is always this worry in the back of your mind - you might be stopped here, you might be stopped there because of international issues and we're really directly involved or related to that issue. Our relation to the issue of war in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, places like that, is always a bother. And because of how things are portrayed in the media, it's always in the front line and flashing at you. You try your best to ignore it, but it comes back. And there's no bullet, no bomb, no thing flying around. But there are words, there are behaviours, there are images that fly. In a way it's more hurtful than being in war zone because in a war zone you know that you'll get killed tomorrow or the other day, you will get caught by a bomb or a bullet. But living in that kind of environment it's like 24-hour horror. Most of the time just thinking, thinking, thinking.

Like a noise?

Yes. Most of the time we joke about these issues. Like my mother-in-law, I ask her why doesn't she go out and she laughs and says they might catch me and take me away because I am wearing this scarf. And I tell her, "No, nobody will take you. Don't worry. Just go out."

Maybe she's joking, but maybe she's not joking.

Yes. There is a park just a five-minute walk from the house. She just started recently walking, short walks. She takes my son. But that joking has a serious psychological effect because she follows the news. She doesn't understand but she understands what's going on. When we come home at night she says, "This Minister, I think he's very angry, he's talking about refugees". She interprets images very well. And in all the houses there is a computer, a television and that is like, I don't know, a presence. The image of war is there and nobody can ignore it. For people who have been through war seeing that reinforces their feeling. Like I was thinking, I'm actually thinking to remove the television from home. I'm thinking, just don't watch it. Actually, I didn't have a television at home and I didn't want it but somehow. My wife, she said that we should have a television but now she also thinks we should get rid of it.

Do you think that you have to actively choose peace? Is that something you consciously have to do?

Not really. You cannot choose consciously peace, I think. It has to have an environment. You have to live in an environment.

You have to experience it?

Yes, you have to experience it and build it slowly. Inner peace. But in terms of struggle, fighting for it, campaigning for it? Yes, of course you have to honour people that have given their lives for creating or for putting forward ideas for living in coherence, like multiculturalism, like social rights, human rights. I think we owe it to them. And we have to play our role according to our own capacity. You have to participate to create peace.

Can you describe a moment, a memory of intense peacefulness? Do you remember a particular experience?

There was one moment that I always remember. I don't know if you call it experiencing peace. I was on the boat coming to Australia and we were intercepted by the Navy and then they instructed us, the driver of the boat, to a direction and

they gave us some equipment - a wireless, and lights. And after travelling five days it was the first night that we entered, I don't know where it was, water that was very rough. There was twenty-five people on the boat. It about five to seven meters long and everyone was shouting, screaming that we're going to die! Then someone was asking a friend of mine to go and talk on the wireless, to ask the Navy to come and save us because we're gonna die. We're gonna sink. And I didn't care. I said, "What the hell!" We had life jackets but we didn't know how to operate them, they were flat ones that I think you had to blow them up. I took one life jacket and I looked at it and it was flat and I said "How can this make me not sink?". I saw this other friend that was really panicking and he was wearing one and so I said "You can take mine too", and I put one in front tying it back to front. And I just told him, "Don't worry". Because of the shouting of people my head was really hurting and then I just lay down on the boat on my back. Normally I can't sleep when there is noise, even when there's a hiss or a small noise I can't sleep. But I woke up the next morning and within one or two minutes I saw that our boat was hooked onto a Navy boat and pulling us and I looked and everyone was very happy. And to

this day I don't know how that happened, why that happened. Why did I go to sleep? Why? It's really puzzling for me. I think accepting that whatever happens happens was part of being peaceful within myself. So if they come, they rescue us, if they don't, they don't. Who cares?

Most of the time, I think that was a peaceful moment. That night asleep within those shouting people saying "I'm going to dive into the water" and I was laughing saying, 'Why, before the ship goes down, do you want to dive? Do you want to save your life or do you want to die?' I think one of the guys was able to speak English, but when the Navy called us everyone told him not to speak English because if he did then they would send us back to Indonesia. Then later when he was refusing to talk he said, "You guys, I can't lie now, I will be portrayed as a liar. Because when we came in they asked, 'Anyone speak English?' and you all said no and wouldn't let me speak with them, so that we would know what was going on. And now you tell me to go and contact them. I can't be a liar, if we survive, I'll be in trouble." So there was that conflict of saving yourself and later being portrayed as a

liar... and it was very puzzling for me and very hard to solve it and so then I said, 'To hell with this!' and then "I don't care!"

Yes, but maybe your ability to have acceptance for whatever happened - for everyone, for anything, for your future... that gives you a feeling of peace, that peace is acceptance?

Yes, I think so. You're right. Most of the time when you're after something, when you want to achieve something and then it's hard and you have to slow down. You know? That's ok. And then you feel lighter. Because you say, "Ok, if it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen, who cares. It's not going to end anything, there's other parts of your life that you have to focus on". Yes, acceptance is the biggest contributor to internal peace. With peace in society if you accept a person that you don't know, that is asking for your help, and you're not afraid and you just dive in and help him then you can discover what happens after that. Then I think that is peace, rather than just being suspicious and eating yourself from within, thinking about what is he going to do? You're getting yourself out there and being involved with a stranger.

*Do you think there is a relationship
between peace and art? For you anyway?*

In terms of practicing, yes. In terms of practically, in the moment of making it, yes. Especially when my hands are involved not only thought. Like if I'm making a sculptural piece that requires work. That state of working with objects makes your mind focus. You get rid of the thoughts that you have and you are focusing on creating stuff and you're after a result, that keeps you happy. But thinking about art gives you more anxiety [laughs] and thinking about this work, that work, should I make this work? How it's going to look? What should it portray? Will it be received well or will it offend people? Should I do this or that? That makes me really stressed. But when you're involved, making it, it's peaceful. Yes.

*Do you think that to lead a peaceful life,
art would play a role in that? Would you
recommend?*

Yes. Yes. Because you create, and then your creation gives you satisfaction. I'm a graphic designer, I studied graphic design and I wanted to work as a graphic

designer, but I did work for a while and things that I was doing were not giving me any satisfaction or ownership. I decided to quit and started...

In the beginning before I studied graphic design I wanted to do art, but people were saying that art doesn't have any income. You have to do something that will earn an income. So I studied graphic design. I worked within those industries just to make money, not to create, not to think critically and to stand for some kind of value and have ownership of that value. So I think every person should make art and think about it and then I don't know, it enriches your thought and actions.