Why I do what I do: Shantigarbha

Shantigarbha is a Bristol-based teacher of Non Violent Communication (NVC). NVC was developed by international peacemaker Marshall Rosenberg, who studied how people could remain compassionate even in the face of suffering and death. It emphasises the quality of connection between people and looks for ways to get everybody's needs met.

A few years ago I led a nine-day reconciliation event for 100 Israelis and Palestinians on the West Bank. It was one of the most profound experiences of my life. We were all scared. Armoured vehicles roared past the flimsy walls of the venue and fighter planes screamed overhead. Some of the Palestinians didn't arrive because of check points and permit restrictions. Some of the Israelis didn't come because of pressure from their families.

It was a cold winter in the desert and we slept on the hard ground. The participants were crammed into men's and women's dorms. We came to a bitter, angry, fearful place so many times, like when we discussed the separation wall.

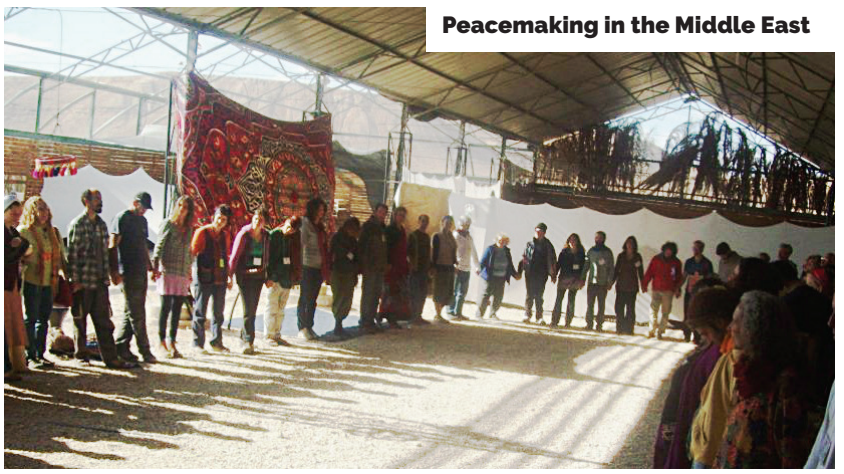
Then I tried to remember the preciousness of connection, to stay connected to myself and reach out to others. We also danced, sang, played, ate together, held hands and celebrated a mock Palestinian wedding so we could learn the dances.

I cried every day. My heart broke to witness the desperate longing for a safe place on the earth. But miraculously, my heart also got bigger.

At the end we couldn't believe that we'd done it – that we had created something that felt so huge. At the same time, I realised that it was a drop in the ocean of suffering. Still, no one would have missed it for the world. I've still got friends from that time and various projects have emerged from it.

When I was growing up, I tried to avoid conflict. In my family, conflict meant shouting and smashing things. Then there was a cold silence for two to three days. During this time, everybody lost connection, love, warmth and belonging. No wonder I was afraid of conflict.

Peacemaking in the Middle East



I had various jobs before becoming a mediator. It all helps when I am trying to understand the issues that people face with their loved ones, neighbours, colleagues or 'enemies'. I got into mediation through Buddhism. In 1996 I was ordained into the Triratna Buddhist Order and given the name Shantigarbha, which can mean Seed of Peace. In 2002 I went to hear a famous mediator, Marshall Rosenberg. He introduced me to Nonviolent Communication (NVC). I became fascinated with resolving conflicts – my own and others'. Nowadays I specialise in international reconciliation events. I've dealt with caste violence in India, the civil wars in Sri Lanka and Nepal, and the conflict in Israel/Palestine.

Sometimes people ask me if it's depressing to see so much conflict. I don't experience it that way. Conflict reminds me of the preciousness of life. But I don't take responsibility for it – that remains with the community in which it arose. I'm just the repair man who climbs up to mend the broken telephone line. I'm not responsible for the messages that get sent along it.

I've come to realise that conflict becomes more dangerous as we move away from it. Given my family background, it's been a painful but liberating process. Moving towards it, I can connect to the life energy it represents. When I'm leading Nonviolent Communication courses in Bristol, it's the same thing. It's just that in hot conflict situations you learn faster what works and what doesn't. "

You can find out more about Shantigarbha's Bristol-based Nonviolent Communication courses at www.SeedofPeace.org. NVC worldwide: www.CNVC.org.

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