

Celebrating and sharing the joy of

The International residential training in nonviolent communication 2012, Sri Lanka

Dear friends of Sandhi Institute -

We are writing to celebrate and inform you about our recent 10-day Intensive Residential Training (IRT) held in February, outside of Colombo, Sri Lanka. We imagine that long-time supporters of Sandhi's work, as well as our new friends and associates, will be interested to hear a few highlights from those 10 days, as well as where our work might lead in the coming months.



This recent IRT was the 3rd such event that Sandhi Institute has organized. We are gratified that each year we have seen participants growing more deeply into their practice of Nonviolent Communication (NVC). This year, we had 10 participants returning from last year's group. Those participants really helped set a tone of openness, deep sharing, and emotional safety, starting with the opening ceremony on the first night. This was an invaluable signal to the rest of the participants to drop their defenses, and to share vulnerably about what is truly alive and important for each person. The deep sharing from participants began during that opening ceremony, as participants talked about difficult and painful issues in their lives. Some of them expressed the pain of witnessing disputes in their communities escalating out of control, resulting in violence, tragedy, and death. From the beginning, the question of "what are we aiming for in these 10 days"

was clear, as the tragedy of what happens when people don't have the skills for how to handle disagreements resonated for each person present at the IRT.

Improved connection through conflicts?

The course of the training, the group had a chance to experience first-hand how conflict can escalate, and how mutual empathy and understanding can lead toward resolution. Participants were successfully able to use the skills of NVC to resolve a conflict that happened in their midst. It began in a single exchange between two individuals and quickly grew into two groups or "camps" where friends as well as the affiliated organizations started to take sides. With the support of the training team and some intensive mediation to help each person as well as each "side" to identify needs and to



Photo caption: Barbara Kochan

come up with strategies that would satisfy the needs, the issue was resolved and connection made. It's a celebration that the final step of the mediation was initiated by one of the participants who had attended last year's training and she very skillfully and diplomatically (with intuitive understanding for cultural norms



Photo caption: Barbara Kochan

around "saving face") brought the two people together to have the final conversation and to reconnect. Those involved got to have an invaluable experiential learning of a difficult and painful issue can lead to mutual understanding and connection when the NVC process is used to stay connected to the needs and to the humanity of each person and each side. The only regret is

that due to wanting to protect people's feelings and the issue around saving face (not to "humiliate"), a large portion of the mediation took place with only those directly involved and this made it difficult for the rest of the group to witness and learn from the process directly. This led some participants to think time was "wasted" in this dispute (some even apologized on behalf of their friends for "wasting time" in this dispute). Still, during the debriefing sessions, the whole group had the chance to reflect on this important process of rebuilding trust in difficult situations.

Celebrating the mourning

Another celebration is the way the group had integrated the learning from last year and was able to share and support each other with things that only one year ago they were unable to do. For example, one night, after the morning's lesson about mourning, grieving, and honoring unmet needs, the participants had a spontaneous session of deep mourning together, supporting each other as some cried and everyone cared for each other in a special atmosphere of acceptance and emotional safety. These outpourings have happened before at Sandhi trainings, but what was notable this time is that it happened with no trainers present, and the participants relied entirely on each other to make that experience both safe and meaningful for everyone involved.



Photo caption: Barbara Kochan

Accepting diversity

Another powerful experience during the IRT was an afternoon session about diversity, inclusion and exclusion with an exercise called “crossing the line”. Participants found it both painful and eye-opening, as people in the group were asked to “cross the line if you have ever been told you are ugly because of the color of your skin,” or “cross the line if you have been unable to participate in certain activities in your community because of your caste.” Or “If you have ever been required to complete forms or been unable to



Photo caption: Barbara Kochan

get services from government offices, police stations, or courts because they were in a language not your own, please cross the line.” Through a series of questions such as these, participants were able to see for themselves, possibly for the first time, some aspects of the systems of class, caste, race, ethnicity and gender which define daily life in Sri Lanka. In this setting, the awareness raising was coupled with compassion for all and they were able to honor each person's experience. We at Sandhi Institute believe

that this type of diversity work is particularly important in the Sri Lankan context because of the ease with which each community can sometimes think of themselves as “the victim”, and the concurrent difficulties of seeing the challenges that others face. People are often aware of their particular disadvantages but not very aware of their own privileges.

The people behind

We were fortunate to have a number of people dedicating their time and energy to making this event a success. Trainers who came from overseas at their own expense and volunteered their time included Roxy

Manning, Kirsten Kristensen, Eva Rambala and Jeyanthy Siva. Assistant trainers were Chamila Udagama and Barbara Kochan. Nalayani Gunanayagam, a Sri Lankan living in California and a long time supporter of Sandhi Institute, came to provide all kinds of support and helped with translation as well. Long time Sandhi team member Gayathri Sewwandi helped prepare and organize the retreat, and also served as onsite coordinator. Volunteers Jai and Sujatha Wanigesinghe (Germans of Sri Lankan origin) led the movement and meditation sessions each day. Along with this, Sujatha gave much needed support with coordination for the Tamil speaking participants. And Jai filmed the sessions and interviewed some participants all of which we hope to include in a short documentary he is coordinating. Last but not least, many of our supporters (that means you!) donated money and fundraised in their home communities, to provide scholarships for participants to be able attend the training. We certainly could not have accomplished this 3rd IRT without all your help!

Evidence of NVC growth in Sri Lanka

We are thrilled to see the fruit that this work is bearing. Some local peace and development organizations who sent staff members to our previous IRTs, sent more than twice as many staff this year, having seen the benefits that come from the practice of Nonviolent Communication. The head of one such organization had this feedback to give: "Thank you. You have really made a change in our people. They come from such different backgrounds and used to be so conflictive, and now the relationships are strong and cooperative."

What is next?

Some participants, who are presently doing peace building training (including NVC) in schools, have requested further specialized training in how best to share NVC with children. We are planning a 5 day training to offer in fall of this year in response to this request. We invite any of you who have experience teaching NVC to kids to contact us if you are interested in participating in any way.



Photo caption: Barbara Kochan

Many participants are already looking forward to returning to the next IRT, and given the demand for this experience, we are planning to increase the frequency to 2 IRT's each year. I hope you enjoyed reading these brief highlights of all that occurred at the IRT and what is being planned for the future. Feel free to contact us any time for further information.

In Gratitude,

The Sandhi Team