



nsforming the Terrorists and Healing the Traumatized

The Art of Living's Multi-faced Approach to Restoring Peace in Bihar, India, and the Balkans

Julia Shepherd Tang, April 2003

Peace education programs around the world are faced with the difficult task of teaching people who have never experienced peace how to cultivate this quality in areas still filled with strife. How can a peace education initiative make a difference when people have undergone centuries of suffering? How will a peace education program manage to infiltrate areas where violence and war have left people with neither hope nor the basic necessities for living? How can a peace education program reach out to terrorists and others who believe that it is their duty to God to kill hundreds or thousands of people? While the picture of the world often seems dark, there are many programs for peace that have been making a small difference in the large scheme, and a large difference in the small scheme.

The Art of Living Foundation is one organization that has succeeded in bringing relief to trauma victims and peace to violent aggressors. How can the same program be effective in both contexts? While the overall program may vary, the fundamental component of the Art of Living Courses—a unique technique for stress-reduction—remains the same. These methods are used in regions of conflict, as well as in prisons, corporations, college campuses and at the U.N. This is not to say that teaching stress reduction techniques like meditation or breathing exercises can replace general first-level response needs like proper shelters, food, and safety. Rather, the point is that these types of peace-making programs can lead to a fulfilling and uplifting change in perspective, which can help serve the long-term goal of sustainable peace. It is the Art of Living's premise that social transformation begins with a happy healthy individual who has attained a decent standard of living and has received essential education in health, hygiene, and life skills. The Art of Living Foundation, staffed by volunteers, purports to teach workshops that offer more than just a new way of conflict resolution but really a new way of living -- an art of living. This analysis will discuss the steps through which the Art of Living has been able to transform hate, using the case studies of Bihar, India and the Balkans.

Bihar, India: A Case Study

Bihar's Background

Bihar, India's second most populous state is home to 90 million people. More prominent than the ancient temples are the thousands of marginalized tribal people with little access to education, clean water, decent employment, and good homes. With the lowest literacy rate in the country, the highest number of police deaths, and the lowest per capita income (it is less than half the Indian average), Bihar is a breeding ground for violent activity.



Bihar, India

Bihar struggles with many problems, including crime, caste rivalries, poverty, illiteracy, and bitter political feuds. Without jobs or schools, youth are drawn into delinquent activities. Massacres, murder, robbery, and rape are the norm.

In Bihar, there are two ultra-left rival warring groups who collectively have committed massacres, kidnappings, and the extraction of illegal "taxes" from villagers. Wealthier individuals higher private militia for protection from these terrorizing groups. One woman in an extremist group interviewed by the Art of Living had committed over sixty murders; several of the men admitted to over 250 killed. The police are no help in preventing this situation, as they are often corrupt themselves. In 1999 Bihar, the violence summed up to 5,000 murders, 3,000 robberies, 1,000 rape incidents and 2,000 kidnappings.^[1]

In such a context, where violence is the norm, economic poverty the reality, and access to education, health care, or

even good public water facilities minimal, any peace education program that does not address (either by itself or in tandem with other organizations) the multiplicity of these factors would seem superficial and would most likely prove ineffective. In a long term, through a multi-pronged approach, the Art of Living Foundation is able to address the economic, ideological, and hygienic factors that have left Bihar in such dire straits.

The Art of Living Foundation

Enter the Art of Living Foundation -- a unique breed of nongovernmental organization (NGO), with special consultative status in the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations. It has swiftly created centers in over 142 countries, bringing stress relief and practical tools to help people move toward healthier lifestyles and healthier communities. Though the program is not rooted in religion, the courses purport to uplift people spiritually. What does the Art of Living mean by spirituality? For this NGO, spirituality is simply being in-spirit, inspired, or natural with oneself. While the Art of Living has dozens of programs that can cater to the specific needs of a population, they all teach some breathing and relaxation techniques. In addition, the values of social responsibility, service, celebration, and leadership are kindled.

Since 2000, the Art of Living has introduced a multifaceted approach to empowering the people of Bihar to regain control of their state. Through skillful mediation, introduction of practical stress relieving techniques, and new economic opportunities, the Art of Living has been able to transform many of the villages in Bihar. This change occurred through four stages that are somewhat interchangeable: 1) negotiations with people in power, 2) leadership training 3) new awareness camps and 4) finally, the building of schools, infrastructure, and new businesses. By moving towards a solution that places sustainable development and capacity building alongside peace education, the approach has been effective.

Negotiations toward the Transformation

Teachers from the Art of Living Foundation recognized that a peace education program could not work without the consent of the ruling, and, in Bihar's case, terrorizing parties. First, Art of Living teachers traveled to Bihar and met with leaders from the warring factions. These leaders were invited separately to come to the Art of Living Center in Rishikesh, India to meet Art of Living Founder and Guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. In India, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is almost a household name, and he has a certain celebrity status. Still these leaders had no intention of meeting a Guru for peace, so they put a challenge to the Art of Living teacher instead. If the teacher were to reach the mainland alive without getting killed, they would go and meet Sri Sri. When Sanjay, the Art of Living teacher, arrived safely home past the killing fields, the militia was so surprised that they kept their word and agreed to come.

Once both extremist groups arrived in Rishikesh and became aware of each other's presence, conflicts arose, but they were quickly put in the Art of Living course together, where they learned the breathing and meditation techniques. At the end of the course, they voluntarily swore to give up their arms and channel their efforts toward community service. They then returned to Bihar and enrolled over 200 people in the Art of Living Course.

Why was this tactic successful? Ambassador Dennis Ross describes why Yassir Arafat refused to consider a peace treaty. He writes, "[Arafat] found it difficult to live without a cause, a struggle, a grievance, and a conflict to define him."^[2] Terrorists are often so effective because they whole-heartedly believe in their cause. With one hundred percent attention on this struggle, they feel powerful. Sri Sri was able to shift the Bihar extremist's need to be powerful and redirect it into a cause for the good. Another pertinent point regarding the Arafat talks concerns the media. The talks with Arafat were also heavily publicized, whereas the news regarding the Bihar criminals was not released to the public until after both sides had solidly committed to new ideas of non-violence. Because pride is so important to the identity of these terrorists, they would never have agreed to take the Art of Living course if it were publicized in any way. Thoughts, the media can become another variable in the outcome of negotiation.

In this instance, the Art of Living teacher is reminiscent of Gandhi. He was so confident that the Art of Living program would work that he was willing to take risks for his vision. While this tale is dramatic, perhaps dramatic efforts are needed to persuade hard-nosed killers to change their perspective. We often see people undergoing great hardships in the name of terrorism, but how often do we see people with such dedication working for peace?

Some may question the ethics of convincing murderers to bring about peaceful solutions in their villages with no repercussions to the terrorists. Dan Bar-On, a scholar who writes about peace education, believes that legal measures must be undertaken against the perpetrators and financial compensation provided to the victims.^[3] Yet, in Bihar, where the officials were corrupt, this type of peace keeping was not an option. Bihar is too remote from the radar screen to receive much international humanitarian peacekeeping assistance, so this leaves no one to capture and then imprison the terrorists. Rather than punishment, where real individual transformation may or may not happen, the Art of Living type of rehabilitative training capitalizes on the terrorists strengths—their commitment to a cause, their ability to organize and influence, and their established power. (It should be noted however, that Art of Living believes that criminals should be given legal punishment.) Because corruption is so entrenched in Bihar, imprisoning the current criminal leaders would simply leave openings for other corrupt individuals to claim control. The lives of

the innocent villagers would not change if the current extremist leaders were simply imprisoned.

The success with the Bihar criminals is not unique. The Bombay police began to aggressively use the Art of Living program "Prison Smart" in their jails once they learned of the Bihar terrorist transformation. Mohammad Afroze, an alleged Al Qaeda operative, was a prisoner in Bombay at the time they introduced the program. After taking two Art of Living Courses, Afroze, who was to blow up the London House of Commons, renounced his violent past. He said he "was promised to go to heaven after death, but found heaven right here." In a move that made headlines in the major Bombay newspapers, Afroze refused bail so he could take the Advanced Art of Living Course being offered in jail. He commented, "The course brought me immense peace. I no longer get angry, nor do I have anything against anyone. When I'm out of prison I want to teach this course to my family and community members."^[4] To qualify, the Art of Living does not claim that, after taking the course, anger is an emotion of the past -- simply that, by continually using the breathing techniques, the time it takes you to return to a serene state of mind will become much quicker.

The Youth Leadership Training Program and 5H

Sanjay, the Art of Living teacher who negotiated with the terrorists, credits his skill in the negotiations to the Youth Leadership Training Course (YLTP). In the YLTP, youths belonging to diverse ethnic and social groups receive an intensive three-month training where traditional personal development techniques (meditation, yoga and breathing exercises) as well as training in rural management, leadership development with spiritual values, and communication skills are taught. This program benefits the youth leaders by helping to instill confidence and responsibility in them, and then these youth leaders instill these same qualities and the villagers. One youth leader recounts, "I was a totally pessimistic person who saw only negativity in everything around me. Depressed in life, I was suffering both physically and mentally. Unenthusiastically, I dragged myself around as the days and years passed. The Youth Leadership Training Program is the best thing that happened in my life. I think this is the most unique program in the world. It has revolutionized my outlook on life from failure, sorrow and stress to enthusiasm and dynamism. I feel incredibly strong."^[5]

The youth leaders bring the Art of Living's 5H program to the villages. 5H stands for Health, Hygiene, Homes, Harmony in Diversity and Human Values. Volunteers organize health care camps to provide medical and dental care to the rural population. Basic health care and hygiene education is also taught. The 5H program is currently building homes in villages, along with toilets, and bore wells for clean drinking water. The Human Values of compassion, belonging, and kindness are rekindled through different processes during the workshops led by the volunteers. Finally, and most importantly, villages recognize the harmony that exists within diversity. Volunteers help organize multi-ethnic festivals that contribute to this sense of belonging (beyond our own ethnic group) and the harmony in diversity. Marc Gopin, a researcher committed to bringing peace to the Middle East, also emphasizes the value of honoring the culture and identity of the "other." He believes that this valuation of human dignity and human life can perpetuate a cycle of peace, rather than one of violence.^[6]

Can these youth leaders be responsible enough to manage these projects? The leaders must undergo extensive training before being sent to the villages and range in age from 20- 30 years of age. The idea is similar to that of the Peace Corps, where people give two years of service to help a group that is underprivileged. In both the Peace Corps and the Art of Living, some volunteers stand out as being able to contribute a great deal more than others. Villagers are often wary of the Art of Living Volunteers initially, but this usually dissipates after coming to know the volunteers personally. Then they look forward to the resources that Art of Living can help provide and recognize their mental improvement since participating in the courses. Because these tribal areas are so marginalized, they have not been offered much assistance from elsewhere, so clean water is a great advance. Finally, the volunteers and villagers work jointly to decide what projects to implement. Villagers are asked to share their local knowledge, so that everyone's expertise is utilized.

Nev Chetana Shivir: New Awareness Camps

After the Art of Living youth leaders had convinced the leaders of the terrorists groups to enroll in the Art of Living Course, the stage was set for Art of Living to reach the vast poor population that had spend decades in strife. These villagers were taught the Nev Chetana Shivir Course (Sanskrit for New Awareness Camp) by the youth leaders. The curriculum includes breathing exercises to help alleviate physical and emotional stress, simple meditation techniques which help one to be stress free and more effective in one's work, talks on healthy diet and healthy living, appreciating harmony in diversity, games and singing to bring about a sense of belongingness. For many years, these villagers have been blaming others for their poverty and turning to alcohol and crime for relief. Through the Nev Chetana Shivir, people learn how to take responsibility for their community, and, just as importantly, their feelings. Why does one person choose to complain and victimize himself or herself in the same situation where another person acts as an inspiration to the community? When people reflect on this question, they become aware of the possibilities rather than the limitations. Because the breathing techniques reduce stress, many feel more empowered to make a change. At the end of the program, villagers are encouraged to take up service projects in their area. With

the help of Art of Living Volunteers, they may build wells, roads, or even start schools.

One Art of Living youth leader recounts a transformation of one of his Nev Chetana Shivar students:

“His life was on the edge and he was earning 15,000 rupees a month just by shifting drugs from one county to another and this money he would blow on his friends and drinking. He was very violent. He even came and threatened me and said if I ever come into his town he would kill me. But he had heard about the Art of Living Course and came. After doing the training, he was completely transformed. He didn’t want to go back. He wanted to do something good, but there was no option. There were no jobs in the village. Farming was not that lucrative, which is why he got into bad company in the first place. Today he is in charge of all the Art of Living work we do over there. He is getting his friends to take the Art of Living Course and his whole life has been transformed.” [7]

In order to help local villagers like this one, the Art of Living Foundation and the communities are also jointly building new vocational centers, developing the land for agriculture, and constructing schools.

One village in Bihar used to have to close the shops at 5pm for worry of leaving the people vulnerable to the criminal activity that happened after dark. Now, with the Art of Living active in this community, stores are open until 9 pm. This is the type of obvious change that can occur with the introduction of Art of Living or other peace education programs.

New Schools for Long Term Sustainability



Children at Sri Sri's tribal schools

Art of Living is helping to build schools in Bihar for students who never formerly had access to education. The schools provide uniforms, stationary and midday meals. At present, 27 schools with 1500 children are in operation in Bihar. In the evenings, the school premises act as the venue for adult education as well as community gatherings and other social activities in the villages.[8]

In addition to reading, writing, and math, students are taught traditions and culture indigenous to their region. In India, the globalization and steps toward modernity often came at the expense of local values, traditions and handicrafts. The Art of Living specifically tries to rekindle awareness of these indigenous treasures for their inherent value as well as to give people a sense of pride. For example, archery used to be the traditional sport in one village, but no one had

been learning it for years. When teachers introduced archery as a subject to the students, many were hitting bull’s-eyes after the second round!

Students also learn simple things like *make a new friend each day*, which increases their sense of belonging with more than a handful of friends. They are taught how to handle teasing and to laugh as they face many of life’s hurdles. When these schools were first introduced outside of Bangalore, this method of teaching produced students who were scoring 95% on national exams. These students were first generation school children.

Without the education of the children, the long-term success of peace initiatives is questionable. Education must provide skills to help children cohabit the world peacefully. In the Balkans, for example, history textbooks were in fact perpetuating the hatred, because only one side of history was told. Education has the ability to either nurture children to be ready to embrace the world and the differences they may encounter, or to continue the hatred of their parents. Schools are one entry point where the cycle of violence can be broken.

Finally

While these various stages are helpful in breaking down the Art of Living activities, they actually often happen simultaneously or in an alternate order. For example, schools are usually started later because of the amount of infrastructure and organization needed, but this need not be the case. The Art of Living uses a variety of tools and will pull out a certain combination as needed to fit the cultural context of the area. While the program is replicated throughout 2000 villages in India, each village represents a slightly different flavor of the Art of Living solution.

In Dumaria, Bihar, for example 30 Nev Chetana Shivar courses were conducted for over 1000 people. About 60% of the people who finished the courses stopped drinking and have started social work. This social work included the creation of a new library and the introduction of mid-day meals at school. After starting to provide these meals, school attendance increased by 30%. The school is also being expanded.

Kosovo: A Case Study

In Kosovo, the focus of Art of Living has been on helping trauma victims to live peacefully and happily within a

multi-ethnic society. Dinka Corkalo, an academic from Croatia, writes:

“In some countries, unresolved traumas from the period of the Second World War have constituted serious obstacles for peace. Former Yugoslavia and Croatia are good examples of how unhealed traumas from the past could be used as fertile ground for the incitement of chauvinism and national hatred. Moreover, many scholars consider unhealed trauma as the determining contributing factor in the outbreak of war in the former Yugoslavia.” [9]

Since the Dalton peace accords, this cycle of violence seems to be continuing. For example, in August 2001, an entire family (parents, three teenage daughters, and an 8 year old son) in Drenice was murdered point blank late at night because someone thought the father had collaborated with the Serbs. Moreover the two journalists investigating these murders were assassinated. Before, the Serbs were often the aggressors and now anyone suspected of Serbian heritage is a target. Violence rather than negotiation became the norm for solving disputes in Kosovo. People lost their ability to see alternative solutions. The children are taught to solve problems with violence and those who are peaceful often become depressed at the desperation of the situation. Although the war has ended, violence has not. The Art of Living chose to work in this area of Drenice, which was the area hardest hit by civilian massacres and atrocities.

Healing the Hate

The Art of Living Program in Kosovo provides holistic education programs to help survivors of violence learn to live in harmony in a multi-ethnic society. The goals of the program are to reawaken tolerance, reconciliation, and acceptance. On an individual level, workshops provide education and techniques that can eliminate the psychosocial reasons for violence. On a global level, these workshops promote religious and ethnic tolerance and peaceful coexistence through deeper understanding of the universal human values of compassion, cooperation, friendship, and a sense of belongingness.

One of the first groups to go through the Art of Living Course was the former Kosovo Liberation Army. Art of Living Teachers met with army leaders and were invited to conduct programs for the soldiers to help relieve stress. According to Art of Living teacher and psychologist Ann Goodwin, these soldiers were still filled with rage. After taking the course, they felt hopeful and wanted to spread Art of Living's message of peace. Many repeated the course over and over and several became course organizers, bringing more people to the course.

Ann Godwin says, “Paranoia keeps people at a level below problem solving and resolution. Then they agitate into frustration, rage and anger. This anger keeps them at a level of functioning, rather than being depressed.”[10] The Art of Living Course helps people to move past their depression, their anger, to a more calm and centered state of mind. It is not an instant miracle pill, but a series of breathing exercises that participants must continue to do on a regular basis for positive results. In addition to the breathing techniques, participants are taught other practical tools.

Pilot Project in Tetovo, Macedonia

Because much of the violence in Kosovo was caused by ethnic differences and lack of dialogue, the Art of Living chose to begin a pilot program in Tetovo, Macedonia, another area where ethnic conflicts run deep and dialogue remains shallow. Tetovo is comprised of about half Albanians and half Macedonians. Students attend classes separately and do not speak the same language, and thus there is no communication or socialization between the ethnic groups. Macedonian students feel endangered and Albanians feel discriminated against.

While professors supported the Art of Living program, they expressed doubts about the possibility of having both Albanian and Macedonian students together in the workshop. After an introductory talk about the course, however, 70 students from both ethnic backgrounds joined the course. During the workshop, these students who wouldn't look at each other previously began to make friends and build respect for each other. They felt a sense of belonging that existed beyond their individual ethnicity and religion, but extended to the other students in the program. Art of Living works to increase this circle of belonging from the narrow identity defined by ethnic or national boundaries to be inclusive of all of human kind.[11]

Problems of Art of Living

While short-term success was evident in Tetovo, without any aftercare programs, these victories could be short lived. To ensure local sustainability, Art of Living is training local people to become teachers of the course and carry out the work themselves, but the training of teachers takes a long time. A “pocket of peace” is not enough to transform the violence of entire communities. One of the reasons for the success in Bihar is that the growth of Art of Living in India has provided an ample number of youth volunteers who are eager to continue to carry out the work started until local teachers are trained. There are thousands of after-care centers around India, so when a person completes the course, he or she will be able to meet weekly with a local group to continue the breathing practices and other follow-up activities. The program in the Balkans needs more trained teachers to continue to support all the people who have

taken the course. Yet the Art of Living course can still make a significant difference in the individual lives of people, who then can go on to become catalysts of peace instead of agents of violence.

Another problem with the Art of Living programs is the disorganization of the organization. With 95% of the teachers volunteer, and no clear hierarchy or structure, programs are started by a varied of methods—random meetings, planned meetings with officials, or grassroots postering. There is no uniform method to initiating a course, and, as a result, many volunteers may have to “reinvent the wheel,” spending much time re-learning administrative and other tasks that have been solved before them. Because of this disorganization, communication can be thwarted and disagreements can arise easily with no clear leadership at local levels -- or rather too many supposed leaders at local levels. Because of its grassroots nature, statistics are hard to come by, and these are instrumental in the ability to gauge a programs success.

Conclusion

Despite its problems, The Art of Living has achieved noticeable improvements in the villages in India and valuable results in the Balkans. While much is still to be done, these successes can be attributed to four prominent strategies and factors. First, the approach is both top-down as well as bottom-up. Gopin writes that “peacemaking is only as strong as the number of people in it.”^[12] Because both the ordinary person on the street and political leaders espouse the program in Bihar and Kosovo, its chance of success was heightened. Without support from both sides, the program might have failed. Second, Art of Living programs have universal appeal because everyone from a soldier to homemaker can understand the value of reducing stress. Those who are more confident are given tools to become leaders and take more responsibility, and those at a lower stage of functioning may be given valuable healing tools to move them out of their depression.

Third, because peace education programs do not operate in vacuums, they must deal with the reality of the socio-economic conditions. Giving people the tools to resolve conflict without giving them help in rebuilding their socio-economic environment seems ineffectual. By providing peace education along with sustainable development people can live at a level where their basic needs are met, freeing their minds up to embrace the concept of peace. In Kosovo, the Art of Living networked with other agencies working on the areas infrastructure, while, in Bihar, Art of Living took charge of both aspects. Fourth, Art of Living Volunteers have confidence that peaceful solutions can work. This confidence not only inspires them to try to meet with extremists, for example, but also helps them to win the approval of unlikely participants. People feel drawn to those who express confidence; if there is more resolve behind proponents of preemptive strikes, then there is a greater chance that this will be the “peace” solution utilized, for example. Gandhi was confident in his strategy of non-violent resistance, and this assurance helped him to free a nation.

There are still immense needs in both Bihar and the Balkans. At the time of this writing, the headlines for local newspapers in these areas describe corruption and more violence. Bihar is comprised of 90 million people, so in actuality work in 2,000 villages is still a small percentage of this population. Yet it is important to remember that just because a change is small doesn’t mean it is not significant. Long-term effects can be difficult to judge. In the Balkans we can never know what the children of Tetovian would have done had they grown up never talking to a person from another ethnic group. The Art of Living Foundation is certainly worth investigating further.

Endnotes

[1] www.India-peoplefirst.org accessed 3/1/03

[2] www.factsofisrael.com. Accessed, 3/4/03

[3] Baron, D. (2002). Conciliation Through Storytelling: Beyond Victimhood. *Peace Education*, ed. Salomon G., and Nevo, B. Mahwah, N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates,

[4] Gautier, F. (2002). *Guru of Joy*. New Delhi, India: The India Today Group

[5] Gautier, F. (2002). *Guru of Joy*. New Delhi, India: The India Today Group

[6] Gopin, M (2002). De-escalation plans and General Steps toward a New Relationship. *Holy war, holy peace: how religion can bring peace to the Middle East*; New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press.

[7] Interview with Radhika Prabhu, Art of Living Volunteer, April 10, 2003

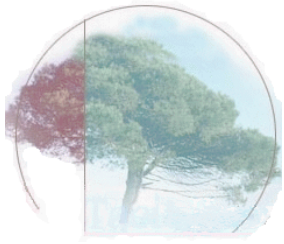
[8] www.5h.org

[9] Corkalo, D. (2002). Croatia: For Peace Education in New Democracies. *Peace Education*, ed. Salomon G., and Nevo, B. Mahwah, N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates,

[10] Email interview with Ann Goodwin, April 20, 2003

[11] Email interview with Snjezana Nisivic, Art of Living Teacher, the Balkans, April 18, 2003

[12] Gopin, M. (2002). De-escalation Plans and General Steps toward a New Relationship, Holy war, holy peace: how religion can bring peace to Middle East; New York, NY: Oxford, University Press. P. 186



[Site Map](#)

[Contents by
Questions](#)

[Contents by
Areas](#)

[Damocles](#)