



Life is quite an interesting business these days. At times, it appears like a burden because we are all so involved in the rat race. Our day is usually quite something – it passes by so quickly that by the time I know, the day is over. I don't know what I have achieved in the day. Usually our achievements for the day are counted in terms of number of tasks completed. We feel comfortable in a structured lifestyle. Any room for emptiness is often quite unnerving.

From December 5th to 14th 2003, together with 28 people, I had an experience which is difficult to describe in words. Yet, the task that I want to undertake here is to re-create that beautiful journey in words, as best as I possibly can. I also hope to be representative enough as I compile this experience into a report.

The opportunity presented itself to us in the form of Global PeaceWorks, an independent, non-profit organization, which was cooperating with and supporting the **Delhi Peace Summit**. Eric Wenzel and Khorrum Omer put together the first interfaith service project for Global PeaceWorks. 30 of us participants from different countries came forward to be part of this project. Each one of us came with our own set of expectations, assumptions, hopes, and even fears about a new country and a new culture, about the kind of people we would meet. We each brought with us a value which added to the diversity of the group. That was our great strength – our diversity – not only in terms of the different countries and faiths that we represented, but

There are times when the question is what and how? The question is why? There are several answers and yet no single, precise answer. And questions persist. I do not have the answer; it is somewhere out there. I can keep searching and yet I won't find it. I can sit still and it may just come to me. At times, I have to search because it is ordained that I have to search – I must go through the search so that I can learn to be equanimous in the face of pain, anxiety and above all, uncertainty. At times, the answer comes easily because that's how it was always supposed to be.

It is difficult to understand designs. Perhaps one does not even have to put one's head to them because the answer lies in doing what you have to do – each one of us has to traverse our own journeys. I cannot say that I carved out the road – I simply followed! The difficulty is in admitting that I simply followed. For this, I have to let go off ego. I have to be able to transcend the 'I' and submit to something greater than me, someone higher than me. I don't want to call it God because I do have an ego tussle with God. But I would like to explore ...

17th November 2003 Zainab Bawa, on the 23rd night of Ramadan

even our ages, right from 17 to nearly 50! And one of the aspects of this experience was that we never did feel the inter-generation gap among ourselves.

We started pouring in for the program from 4th December. As I saw each new face, I wondered what was in store. I remember clearly Titus introducing himself to me with a warm smile and I felt quite comfortable. Often I feel that our fear is of the 'other'. We are skeptical, judging, and suspicious – it is an almost animal-like initial survival instinct, but the challenge, and true courage I feel, lies in being able to move beyond these initial feelings and opening up the mind and heart.

By the time lunch was served on 4th, each one of us was responsible for one or the other preparatory tasks for the program. Some of us were filing papers, some printing sheets, some of us working on the schedule. The activities picked momentum on the 5th as more people poured in and we began to ready the works and ourselves for the introductory session on the afternoon of the 5th.

Some of the international participants who had arrived during the wee hours of 5th morning were taken to the slums of East Delhi in Jaffarabad, Janta Colony. Here, **Chetanalaya**, a partner of Global PeaceWorks for this project, works to bring about harmony between Hindus and Muslims. Anthony David is spearheading Chetanalaya. Our work as Global PeaceWorks volunteers was to help Chetanalaya to build a community center which would serve as a model of people working peacefully together. This slum in East Delhi (known as Janta Colony) was our work site for the rest of the project.

During the introductory session, 4 guidelines were made clear:

- 1. This is an interreligious and “meta-religious” project**
- 2. This is a peace-making event**
- 3. This is an intercultural event**
- 4. We are interdependent**

I don't know how many of us actually remembered these rules. I, for one, recollect them only now, when I am compiling this report. But I know that each one of us adhered to these rules very naturally, irrespective of whether they were consciously present in our memories. Interdependence was a strong feature of our group. We supported each other as each one of us went through our personal journeys of reflection and change.

Thereafter, we had a session where we were paired off and had to introduce our partners. This was a good ice-breaking exercise.

After this, Eric assigned specialized tasks to each member in the group. Gayatri was made responsible for medical care of the group; Roshan was put in charge of the food and menu; Titus, Chad and Piya were responsible for the morning devotional sessions, and so on.

Later in the evening we had a session with Father Freddie D'Souza, director of Chetanalaya and one of Anthony David's colleagues who came to talk to us about Chetanalaya's work. He gave an insight into the problems which the community was facing. At the end of his talk, we had a discussion about the situation in the community, the work done by Christian priests in India and the persecution that some of them face. Questions were raised; a discussion ensued. I personally feel that it is important to question things happening around us, particularly in an environment where people of different faiths are present. This gives us an opportunity to clarify our assumptions and doubts (and even melt from some of the previously held positions and stands). To my mind, this is interfaith communication, which then paves the way for interfaith dialogue.

After dinner that evening, Khorrum Omer's friend from Delhi University came to talk to us. He is a classical singer and he sang some songs in the various classical traditions for us.

By the end of the day, each one of us were tired and ready to drop off to bed, perhaps one of those days when you feel that the bed was the greatest invention of mankind!

Reflections from my diary for 4th and 5th December:

I don't know what I am doing here. Am I in the right place? Did I make the right decision to come here?

It is difficult for me to talk religion in public. People here are different. Will I be able to fit in?

I guess I need to wait and watch ...

6th December:

Today, Fazida Razak, Joseph Lo Votrico and Nicoletta Gomiero joined us.

After breakfast, Sadeque Hussain and I made a presentation on the history of communal violence in India. Sadeque spoke of his experiences in Gujarat during the riots of 2002.

Chad shared his experience of the visit to Janta Colony on 5th. It set the ball rolling for Fazida to lead us into a brainstorming session about what we would do in the coming week with the Janta Colony community.

We broke down into groups as we discussed what we felt was important to be done in the community. Several ideas came up: finishing the construction of the community center, doing a mural in the community, doing house visits and strengthening the efforts of Anthony David and doing a cultural afternoon with the community's involvement, were some of the ideas.

Our work in Chetanalaya was to begin from 8th.

After lunch, three jeeps set off to take us to a tour of some of the religious sites in Delhi. Our first visit was to a Gurudwara. As we excitedly stepped into the Gurudwara, we found that it was locked. But our guides, Harkirat Singh and Sethi, asked us to take off our shoes and socks and wait patiently. So we did.

Harkirat, I can best describe as 'jumping jack'! I am amazed by the energy that he has and I wonder what wonderful things he can do with this energy in him.

As we were waiting patiently, an announcement occurred, "People, this is the WRONG Gurudwara!"

After much hush-hush and hoo-hoo, we moved to proceed, this time, hopefully to the right Gurudwara! It was a warm welcome. Those of us who did not have headscarves got colorful scarves to cover our heads. I find this to be an interesting practice even in the

mosque when I am there (which is rarely!). I do not know what the meaning of this practice is, but I have come to believe that covering my head as I come before a power higher than me indicates my submission to it, my faith in it, my humility before its magic!

The caretakers of the Gurudwara gave us a brief history of Sikhism. The priest in the Gurudwara read out a verse from the *Granth Sahib* (the holy book of the Sikhs) and then, Sethi on the *tabla* (Indian version of drums played with the palms and wrist) and the priest on the harmonium, together they began to recite the verses in music. Again, I really appreciate and enjoy this practice. I feel faith can be so beautifully expressed through music. I may not have the sweetest voice, but the inner power inside me and my faith manifest themselves through my voice, and if I am honest and true with myself, my faith reaches out. I sing for the sake of my faith and for the love of god (whatever my understanding and meaning of god).

We had a brief question-answer session and thereafter, our host in the Gurudwara said to us, "You are people from different countries and faiths. Would you like to visit the Sufi shrine next door?" We agreed. I felt that his offer came from within, a respect for another tradition and support for it.

After a cup of tea and refreshments, we proceeded to the Sufi Shrine. All of us went through the *durgah* but only the men were allowed inside the actual shrine. Later, our host told us the reason behind this custom. According to the tradition, a lady was planted to malign the Sufi saint whose shrine this was. She said before a court of people that the saint was the father of baby inside her stomach. People knew this to be false and they asked the saint to use his magical powers and bring forth the truth. The truth was revealed when the baby inside the womb spoke and said that its father was one of the persons who had planted his mother to malign the saint. After this incident, the saint announced that henceforth no woman would be allowed to visit his shrine. Women can see his shrine through holes in the walls, but cannot actually visit it.

After this experience, we went to visit the Qutub Minar. The Qutub Minar is a heritage structure in India. Some of us went to see it while the others decided to roam around in the vicinity.

We then proceeded to the center. After dinner, Eric announced three team leaders who would be responsible for their respective teams for communication of announcements and decisions and to maintain order. The three team leaders were Chad Johnson, Dinesha Liyanasuriya and Zainab Bawa.

We were broken into three teams. The team leaders sat with Eric, Khorrum and Fazida and we discussed the structure and framework of our session at the Delhi Peace Summit (DPS) which was to begin the next day. Our session at the DPS was "Youth and the Culture of Peace". After we decided on the framework of the session, the team leaders went back to their teams and briefed them about the program the next day.

Reflections from my diary for 6th December:

Today I made friends with Yasiru and Subba. Subba is an interesting person. Perhaps we are similar in some respects. So, do we often gravitate towards people who are similar to us?

Gayatri was present while I was talking about the history of communal violence in India. I don't know how she felt while I was talking. I also wonder how she felt during the Gujarat riots. I must talk to her. Here is my chance to understand.

Today I was screaming at Yasiru while we were in our jeeps going to the various religious shrines. He was putting his head and hands out of the window, right in the middle of this rowdy and crazy Delhi traffic. What if something happens to him? I screamed at him, stupid boy, doesn't know that he may just be maimed for life. He is careless. He needs to be taken care of. But then in the evening, when Subba, Yasiru and I went out together, he was once again up to his antics, running across the roads and dodging with the traffic. Once again I told him, "You had better take care!" He said to me, "I live in a country where I have to dodge everyday with bullets and guns, dodge with life and death. Today I am here, tomorrow, who knows? So what is all this for me? I am having fun" (Yasiru is from Sri Lanka.)

I felt ashamed of myself. Here I was trying to be paternalistic (or maternal should I say?) and I thought Yasiru is someone who doesn't know. But he knows, maybe more than I do. He knows what is good for him, what is right for him. He can take care of himself and also of others around him (he was holding my hands as I was trying to cross the road!). I don't need to be his mother. We are equal, each with our own experiences. We can share, equally! We can be friends!

Yasiru was talking to me and he said, "You are my sister." I accepted. I will take him as my big brother; he is so tall after all! I look like David before this lovely Goliath!

7th December:

Delhi Peace Summit starts today. All of us are dressed in our best. We have a session at DPS – "Youth and the Culture of Peace". Eric is going to chair the first half of the session where Dr. Jerry Chang will speak about his initiatives.

After registration and completion of formalities, we found that Yasiru is the only one who will not be allowed entry for the President's address this evening. Yasiru was to be on his own.

We gathered into a room assigned to us to do our session. As people entered, we felt a significant absence of youth in the session.

We began the session with a prayer, an interfaith prayer. Gayatri began. She sang, with closed eyes, a song "*Eeh maalik tere bande hum*" (Oh Lord, we are your devotees). This is a beautiful hymn from a Hindi film and it is a universal song, no boundaries of any religion. As Gayatri sang, I felt the same wave of feeling – expression of one's faith. Fazida, Chad, Piya, a Jain from the audience, all of them offered their prayers, and these became 'our' prayers. Prayer has no language, (in spite of having a language); I believe prayer is talk, conversation, and often I don't need to understand the language in order to understand this conversation – it gets communicated through vibes!

After this prayer, Dr. Chang began with his presentation on World Vision. He showed a documentary of groups of young people from different countries coming together and touring around the world and singing everywhere they go. After the documentary, Jerry Chang mentioned that while this work is effective and important, there is a need to add the interfaith dimension to it. Jerry Chang has started his own organization called 'Humanity

United Globally [HUG]'. HUG has a secular background and this is essential in order to bring people together without suspicion. A question-answer session followed.

I felt curious. While watching the video, I felt that here is a group of young people who are dealing with one aspect of identity, their national identities. They come together with their various national identities and discover each other during this journey. Is there really a need to add the interfaith dimension? Would adding this dimension make the process more complex? I asked this question to Jerry Chang who said, "Today, we can no longer afford to talk about religion in private, because it has become public. We have to address religion in public." I felt quite satisfied with this answer. I realized what I needed to do ...

Other questions were raised.

'What does the West think of Islam? Do they think that Islam is violent?'

Dr. Chang mentioned that there is a need to clear some of the biases and prejudices concerning Islam.

To this, the person who had asked the question said, "Well actually, Hinduism is violent too. The term 'vaad' in *Bhagvaad Gita* (a holy book of the Hindus) means violence!"

To this, the entire audience jumped up! Everybody was willing to pounce (not physically, but in terms of argument) on the other. 'This is not right, this is not right', everybody was screaming. There was pandemonium.

Eric was moderating the session. He stepped in. His eyes were red and tears were threatening to fall. He spoke, perhaps in the loudest of his voice I've ever heard:

"This is Khorrum, my Muslim friend. When Babri Masjid was being demolished, what was this Muslim doing? He was restoring Hindu temples that were in disrepair.

This is Sadeque Hussain from Gujarat. He has experienced the worst of communal violence. Today, he has come to volunteer for this interfaith experience and he has brought along with him Gayatri who is Hindu, to share in this experience.

This is Zainab Bawa. Her family's business was burnt down during riots. Today she is involved in interfaith activity, trying to promote peace.

What is each one of us here for? What are these Global PeaceWorks volunteers doing here? We are trying to help the community in East Delhi in Janta Colony to build their community center and be a model of people working together peacefully. I invite each one of you here to come and work with us, to do something."

Eric had the last word, literally. His words, and more than his words, his passion and determination spoke and reached out to people. The chaos was silenced. We went in for a tea break after which the second half of the session commenced.

In the next half of the session, we were broken into groups. Each group was a mix of people from different faith traditions. A facilitator in each group was to guide the discussion.

Each group had to discuss concrete steps which need to be taken in order to further interreligious dialogue and move towards the vision of harmony among religions. As the discussion was in progress, a person entered the room. He asked Eric, "Which group is for the Hindus?" Eric put this question to all of us, and people in all the groups raised their hands and said, "This is the group where Hindus are seated!!!" And Eric asked the person, "Sir, in this session there are no groups of one religion, we are all sharing together, the way we should be in our daily life."

In my group, we discussed possibilities and concrete steps. One of the members mentioned, "This gathering is meant for young people, but how many young people are actually present here? We need to do something to encourage more youth to participate in these forums."

Each group made presentations of their discussions. I find that the presenter has a special responsibility; he or she needs to be careful to report 'objectively' (as far as possible) what the group has discussed and be truly representative. The temptation always is to bring in one's own views while presenting instead of really presenting what the group has discussed.

After the presentations, we broke for lunch.

I knew Yasiru would be alone for the evening. I decided not to attend the President's speech and be with Yasiru.

In the evening, the group went for the President's speech followed by dinner. Thereafter, they met with Dharma Master Shin Tao and had a session with him.

It was a long, long day. Tomorrow, our work with the Janta Colony is going to begin. We retired!

Over and out for the day!!!

Reflections from my diary for 7th December:

Today the Delhi Peace Summit began. I felt like I felt in the Parliament of World's Religions in 1999. Ceremonial, grand! But is this what I want? Not exactly! What kind of space do I want for myself and which I can offer to people around me?

The best thing about the Parliament was the space for youth. I felt so happy there. Hope flickers at its highest in me on such occasions. I feel that youth (which is really a frame of mind!) make this world so vibrant. Babies have this ability. Babies are life. We are also babies, adding life to life.

I feel interreligious dialogue needs young people and their ideas and vision. Somewhere, we have the flexibility, the openness. We are malleable and ductile; we need to rekindle in ourselves the ability to think for ourselves, reason out propositions and ideas, and decide for ourselves. Choice is in our hands.

Today, I deliberately decided to stay out of the President's address. To be honest, I don't like our President too much because he has given us the atom bomb which I think is a curse. I think he is naïve, though he may be well meaning and well intentioned. I didn't really want to listen to him.

Yasiru was going to be alone. I felt a bit bad for him. How does it feel when I am the only one who is left out? It is a bad feeling. Not too healthy for a group. I may not harbor ill will against anybody, but the hurt stays.

He is a foreigner in my country. I may not act as his host, but I felt that this was the opportunity to strengthen my relationship with him. I decided to have a very good time with him. Happiness is so crucial; it is a way to peace inside me.

I know that I must have missed something by not being there for the President's address. Maybe I missed some important words and advice. But I made a choice, my choice, and I made my decision, knowing that I was going to miss something. It was a worthwhile trade-off. In fact, there can be no trade-off for a relationship. Everything in this world works on relationships. Even in the eco-system, it is the relationships which produce our food for us. The lion eats the deer; the bones of the deer mix with the earth to make the earth rich in nutrients and fertile. From the earth come plants. We get our vegetables from there. I feel this is life. In a relationship, we need to give something in order to get something; someone submits and everyone receives.

When we came back from our outing to Ashoka Hotel to leave with others, Roshan came out and said to Yasiru and me, "You missed the Dharma Master's blessings!" I said to myself, "but I think both Yasiru and me were blessed by the Universe."

8th December:

Today we are going to the work site. Some of us left earlier than the others. Khorrum, Chad, myself, Fazida and Umberto were in the car. Everyone was discussing the President's speech. I told Khorrum that I had a problem with the President of India. He is naïve and I did not feel like listening to him. Khorrum presented his point of view. Umberto mentioned that our President was totally himself, no pretensions. I realized that I needed to rethink my position. It is important to question one's position from time to time. I may want to continue to stick to my position, but the least I can do is to be open in my mind.

We had a choice, either to go to DPS or to be at the work site. Subba, Ricky, Titus and Roshan went to DPS. We felt that this choice was important so that those of us who went to DPS would share their experience with the rest of us who went to the work site.

Amy and Issa joined us at the work site. Both of them had come for DPS but they felt interested in what we were doing.

We began with a prayer. A small circle held hands and prayed inside the work site while the larger circle held hands and prayed on the outside of the work site. Holding hands is a powerful symbol. It is a great feeling of oneness and of unity. Oneness makes me feel as if I am not one person, the universe is inside me and I am universe; there is no duality. Unity makes me feel that in spite of our overt differences, we can be together, work together.

Chad took on the leadership and distributed some tasks. I remember Dinesha was most sporting. She just took to the tools and began working, oblivious of what everyone else around her was doing. She was the workman of the day.

[My award for the workman of the day goes to Dinesha from Sri Lanka and to her indomitable spirit!](#)

While some of us were involved in the physical labour, Fazida was doing house visits with the rest of us. Erica and Issa went 'click-click' with their cameras. Juliette was followed by the kids. Juliette has this sweet look on her face. One can feel naturally attracted to her serene face and her calm movements. Children followed her wherever she went.

My award for Pied Piper of the Day goes to Andrea Juliette Mair from Germany!
[Three Cheers!]

Yasiru was being called on to help with lifting pans of sand which are extremely heavy. He is a big guy, and he was most needed today.

So Gulliver of the Day is Yasiru Fernando from Sri Lanka.

Work was progressing. Everybody from the community was watching us. They wouldn't really join in to do the work, but their curious eyes were constantly staring at us, wondering what a bunch of colored people were doing here.

The Janta Colony slums are dirty. Sewage systems are in complete disorder. Basic civic amenities are unavailable to people there. Water and sewage problems compound health problems.

I saw Anthony David for the first time. He can easily disappear in the crowd. I wouldn't call him charismatic, but I can definitely say that I have met a man who is determined. He is consistent and persistent. His determination is evident in his work, in his body language and his example, all of which combine into this personality called Anthony David.

By afternoon, Amy, Issa, Piya, Kesumi and myself left for DPS while the others continued to work. The group at the work site then left for the center at 1:00 PM.

At DPS, I met with the others from our group who had had a fruitful day meeting different people and attending sessions about different religions.

In the evening, all of us were invited to a performance and dinner hosted by the Chinmaya Mission. While we were waiting to enter the performance, Fazida came running and introduced us to Agyat Mitra from Play for Peace. Agyat was to teach us some games which we could play with the children in Janta Colony.

Each game Agyat taught us was magical. Somewhere, when I was playing the games myself, I felt a sense of loosening up. I have often felt that when we grow into adults, we give up playing; we become 'tight'. Play is so important to be agile, active and alive. Play is healthy. Maybe we adults have forgotten to play.

All of us enjoyed the games Agyat was teaching to us. We were playing!!! The best game was one in which we had one person inside the circle who would call out to another one person's name from the group and that person had to respond by calling out to someone's else's name from the group. This would continue until someone goofed up. And then we would all sing in a tune, "Dippi dippi dappa – dappa dappa – dippi dippi dappa" (and repeat). The idea of the game is to be relaxed. I felt so nervous myself, but the key was to relax and enjoy! If I goof, I go into the circle and wait till someone else goofs!

We invited Agyat to join us for lunch next day and to teach us some more games. After the 'gaming' session, we met with Jay from Habitat for Humanity. We introduced

ourselves to Jay who encouraged us in our endeavor. We then proceeded to join the performance and dinner.

By 10 PM, we were readying ourselves to rest enough for another day tomorrow.

Reflections from my diary for 8th December:

Today, after a long, long time, I entered into actual physical labour. It was enjoyable. I realized how little I use my hands. Rather, I use my hands hardly. Today, as I broke bricks, separated the good bricks from the bad ones, dirtied my hands in the mud and felt yucky about mud, wondering whether I was actually touching human shit, I felt something indescribable. The joy of constructing together, building something together, it's so marvelous. I remember how Simmin and me would build blocks when we were kids. It would feel so great to put up something together.

As we worked like workmen, organizing ourselves into a work force today, it felt absolutely great, delightful!

Tonight I shall sleep well. Perhaps this is one of the well-deserved sleeps of my life.

I would like to build houses someday!

9th December:

Good morning!

Today everyone will be going to the work site and no one will be at DPS.

Today Moonhwa has joined us in our work. Moonhwa has been living in Delhi since 9 years. She is from Britain. Her father is British and her mother is German.

Umesh also joined in. Umesh is Bahá'í. He lives in Delhi.

Today, the group would be divided into two. One half would work at the work site while the other half would clean up the playground. The task of cleaning up the playground was rooted in the idea that it would be used on the last day for a cultural programme.

When we reached the playground, we found that only Indians could clean the playground because the presence of 'white' people would attract outsiders and this in turn could create a ruckus. Subba, Shakeel, Roshan, Harkirat, Ammu, Fazida and myself took on the task to clean the playground.

The playground was, in absolute terms, horribly dirty! It had every kind of rubbish on it, a lot of shit as well because it is also used as a big toilet.

As we got about to clean it, a lot of people came forward to help us. An old lady gave me some sacks from her house to collect the rubbish. Some of the children brought wooden sticks to use as brooms and to collect the rubbish and throw it into the bags. Someone else brought us brooms. The women and older men from the community were very happy to see us cleaning the playground. One woman from among them came up to me and said, "Why

don't people from our colony use their own houses to defecate? Everyone throws rubbish here. And our children also play here. We really want to keep our surroundings clean." I was touched by these words.

Fazida was surrounded by children. They were helping her to do the cleaning. Children were all over. Some of them were just watching us. After a while, they would get bored and move away. But some of the children were very helpful. I offered my gloves to one of them as he was using his bare hands to work. After that, a lot of children came running and said, "We want to clean, can you give us gloves?" A big bunch of us were at the task.

After a lot of cleaning and sweeping, we were called to take some refreshments. While the refreshments were happening, Eric asked if some of us would like to do house visits. Umberto, Ricky and myself decided to go. One of the team members of Chetanalaya took us to a house.

On the outside was a cot. Two elderly ladies were sitting on the cot. They welcomed the three of us as we came. The Chetanalaya lady told them, "*Yeh log aapse milne aaye hain.*" (These people have come to meet you.) Umberto greeted them *namaste* (in Hindi, hello!) with his warm smile. Umberto's smile is very comforting. Ricky joined in. I gave my *salaam*.

I started asking questions. "So what do you do?"

The lady replied, "I take care of the house. This one (she said pointing to the other lady) does embroidery work. She is a daily wage earner."

I asked them how they feel about the dirt around them.

She replied, "It is awful. We have asked the municipality to come and take the garbage everyday. They don't do it. When we start to do it, their men come and shout at us, asking us why are we doing it. They say they will do it. Neither do they do it nor do they allow us to clean up our surroundings. Now you tell us what should we do?"

I asked them if there is any tension between Hindus and Muslims in the community.

She replied, "No problem at all. We attend their ceremonies and functions and they attend ours. We know that if we fight between ourselves, it is going to harm us most. We believe in harmony and peace."

I asked if any marriages take place between Hindus and Muslims.

She said, "*Nahi bhai, yeh nahi hota hai!*" (No, no! This does not happen) and she began to laugh about it.

Ricky asked me to ask them how many children they had.

Both ladies bit their tongues and said that they have lots of children. There was a sheepish grin on their faces. I asked what their daughters were doing.

She replied, "*Shaadi ho gayi unki.*" (They are married.)

"At what age," I asked.

Again both of them bit their tongues and said, "Early ages. Like 15, 17."

I asked, "Is it because of the safety factor?"

She said, "Yes. We have to protect the honor of our girls. Here in the slums, there is danger. Men look at our girls with different intentions. We feel that it is better to marry them off and let their husbands protect their honor. They are safe in their husbands' custody."

[I was interpreting the questions and answers to Ricky and Umberto.]

I asked, "So, did you have to give dowry?"

Both of them replied, "Yes, of course!"

Ricky said, "Tell them that when men marry women in our country, it is the men who give dowry to the women and not vice-versa." (Ricky is from the Philippines.)

When I interpreted this to the two ladies, they jaws dropped in surprise. "What," said one of them, "really? This doesn't happen here. Wish it would happen here!"

We finally realized that it was time for us to leave. We bid good-bye to our hosts. It felt wonderful and warm to talk to them. Ricky also had a grateful and satisfied look in his eyes.

We went back to the work site, did a final prayer and left. As we were leaving, the children who had helped us to clean the playground were running behind us and following our vehicles. Umberto was playing with the children as we were leaving. He was lifting them up and they were squealing in delight. I was laughing as I heard the children squeal. Umberto said to me, "Isn't this wonderful? Look how much happiness we are creating here, just by coming here and working." I nodded in agreement.

We pushed into the jeeps to get back to the center. Agyat was waiting for us there. During the ride back, Roshan who was sitting beside me in the jeep, said to me. "You know, it is very confronting to do work like this. We have to confront ourselves." I felt very touched when Roshan said this. I was feeling this myself and when Roshan said this to me, I felt a sense of affirmation. Was each one of us feeling this way?

Back at the Center, some of us joined Agyat who was teaching us games in the lawn. I saw people rolling with laughter as they were playing the games. Dinesha was singing, "Dippi dippi dappa - dappa dappa - dippi dippi dappa". The song seemed to have gotten to her.

In the evening, we went to attend the Dalai Lama's speech at Gandhi Peace Mission. Each one of us was dressed in our Global PeaceWorks t-shirt. We looked like a contingent!

The Dalai Lama emphasized the importance of working on our individual selves, changing ourselves, being active! He said a lot of important things and finally, each one of us stood up and lit candles as we sang, "We shall overcome some day! Deep in my heart, I do believe, that we shall overcome some day!"

We went for dinner organized by DPS. DPS ends today.

Close of yet another day.

Reflections from my diary for 9th December:

Roshan mentioned how it is confronting to work with our hands and in dirt. Today, while cleaning the playground and lifting the shit, I felt for those who clean the drains and sewers in our cities. How do they feel when they have to jump into the sewers to remove shit which is produced by millions of us, that too on a daily basis? Do they feel 'yucky' like how I felt? For me, I just have to pull the flush and lo behold the shit is gone. But what about them? How does it feel for them?

I loved visiting the house today. It felt so nice. Just the sheer fact of talking to the people there made me feel as though we were creating a bond together. I don't know whether I will ever see them again in my life after this and whether they will ever see me again, but both of us have touched each other's lives and have produced that moment of joy, oneness and happiness which is precious and invaluable.

I love building relations. Maybe this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. I feel the world will take care of me if I do just this. Today, I feel even more strongly that I want to be a gypsy. My guitar is all the more valuable to me today. I feel singing and talking are so important. But how much do we really spend our time doing this? We love structured lives and that is important to some extent, but what about room for emptiness, for leisure, for nothingness?

10th December:

Today we are a bit relaxed. We do not have to go to the worksite. It is a holiday from work. But what lay in store for us today was a lot of working on our individual selves.

We spent part of the morning in re-doing our schedule and taking suggestions from everybody, what each one thought of the programme so far and what we would like to see further included in the programme. After this exercise, Fazida asked us to pick one thing from nature and bring it with us to the lawn where our next session would take place.

Each one of us picked up something. We played a little game. We formed two straight queues facing each other. Each one of us had to change one thing about our physical appearance in the first round and had to guess what our partner had changed. In round 2, we had to change two things. In round 3, three things had to be changed. It was a test of accurate observation. As we closed the exercise, Fazida said, "this was only about changing physical things, what would happen if we had to change our own behaviors and natures?"

After this warm-up exercise, we sat down in a big circle. Fazida announced the next set of directions. We had to break up into our respective groups (the 3 groups made in the beginning). In our small groups, one person had to appreciate another from the group and say how that person made a difference to him. Then, that person hands over the thing which he has picked up from nature and gives it to the person appreciated. The person who is appreciated says 'thank you' and then appreciates someone else. This process continues till each one in the group has said something and has been appreciated.

As we were about to begin, Eric announced that Mazher Ahmed, one of the trustees of Global Peace Works is here and we need to listen to her.

Mazher spoke of her experiences. She had migrated to United States in the early 1970's. She spoke of her relations with her Christian neighbor Marsha who once volunteered to take care of their house and continue with their set practice of offering the house for Friday prayers to the Muslim community in the neighborhood while the Ahmed's were away for a visit to India.

One of the crucial statements which Mazher Ahmad made was, "We have a choice between good memories and bad memories." I felt this was a very important statement, for two reasons. One, it fundamentally spoke of memories. A lot of our anger and conflict is based on memories. Secondly, and again fundamentally, the statement was about choice – I choose to retain either good memories or bad memories or both. Conflicts which are a product of historical wrongs are precisely about this choice – to let go off bad memories and create space for a future. In my mind, even in our own families, we have a choice to deal with the bad memories, let go off them and therefore the scorns, and create the opportunity for happiness to enter our lives.

After Mazher Ahmed went away, my group sat down and we went ahead with the appreciation exercise.

In my group, each one of us spoke. Erica began with Umberto, how she felt Umberto had made a difference to her. Umberto spoke of how he felt that Titus was his brother and that Titus made a difference to him. Titus spoke of Piya and Piya mentioned how he wanted to give his gift of a flower to Erica because she was the future, the hope that this world has and thrives on. Subba appreciated me and I spoke of how Roshan's words had made a difference to me.

That moment in the group was very strong. Fazida stepped in said, "Let us lift our spirits higher. Let us look into each other's eyes for a moment. Let us switch and form pairs so that each one of us has the chance to look into each others' eyes." As we looked into each other's eyes, tears rolled. Different feelings crept in and made their way out. It was a very sublime and yet, a very powerful moment.

We then went through a debriefing session where we spoke of what we went through in the time when we looked into each other's eyes. Umberto apologized to Subba for the historical wrongs which white people have committed over dark-skinned people. Erica and me spoke of our family experiences. Towards the end, we held hands and prayed.

After a short break, all of us came back. We sat down and began an exercise on interaction styles. The purpose behind doing this exercise was that when people come together, there is some friction and misunderstanding. One way of working together is to understand our own and everyone else's interaction styles, both in good times and in times of stress and pressure. This helps to understand the composition of the group, appreciate each other's style, and balance the needs of the group.

After this exercise, we went for lunch and then set out to visit some religious sites in Old Delhi. We first went to a church and got a background history of the church. Then we went to the Gurudwara and had an experience of being in a community prayer service. We then proceeded to a mosque where we offered prayers and spoke to the Imam of the mosque who answered our queries about Islam.

After this, we went to do our favorite activity – shopping! Each one of us went into our own splurge! And we indulged!

After the indulging (I mean shopping), we went to the Jama Masjid. We then went to indulge in a different kind of activity – eating! This time, and this was the first time in all these days, that all of us sat for a non-vegetarian meal. We ate at Karim's, a restaurant famous for its grilled food. As kababs, grilled chicken and biryani poured in, we felt a way to heaven through food!

On returning to the center, we snuggled into our blankets and made way for another long day tomorrow. (I said grace that night, after a long time. This was for the food which Providence had 'designed' for us!)

Reflections from my diary for 10th December:

Today was a powerful day. The exercises in the morning made me realize that the primary responsibility that I have towards myself is the commitment to look into myself, be aware of what lies inside me, empty myself from time to time, and change myself. I cannot make any change in the world unless I do not change myself. I cannot be a revolutionary and claim to change the world when a lot lies inside me.

I felt so good today. I almost felt that an empty space was created inside me. I would not call it vacuum because vacuum is negative. I can only call it emptiness.

When I hugged Fazida today while looking into her eyes, I felt like some of my history of conflict with my family was going away and I could not hold it. I did not want to hold it. I was watching it go and a feeling of mirth crept inside me.

Sometimes things can be so simple. But then, it is the simple things which are difficult. I don't know what tomorrow will bring with it for me. But I can be open to receive it.

11th December:

Today is a long day, a really long day. We are moving to the worksite by 7:30 AM this morning. Rahim has joined us today. Rahim is from Iran, currently studying in Pune.

Our day looks like this:

At the worksite from 8:00 AM to 1:00 PM.

At Tribal Welfare Society to meet with the founder Maria Mangte and the Burmese Refugees from 1:00 PM till dinnertime.

Dilip from Rotary International will join us in the afternoon to talk about the Everest Peace Project.

In the evening, Ela Gandhi will talk to us.

At night, we are in to share dinner with refugees from Myanmar (Burma). The dinner was prepared by people from Manipur looking to improve their living situation.

We reached the worksite early that morning. On all the previous days, we would be there by 10 AM, but this morning we were early. On seeing us, one person from the community remarked, "*Aaj fauj jaldi aa gayi!*" (Today the army has come early!) After our prayer, six of us decided to break into two teams of three each and visit families in the community. Gayatri, Dinesha and Sadeque formed one team while Moonhwa, Subba and myself were the other team. Rachna, one of the co-workers in Chetanalaya, guided our team.

Rachna has been working with Chetanalaya since almost a year. Earlier, she would give tuitions to children in her house and earn more than she is earning currently. But she chose to do this work because she felt that Chetnalaya's outreach programme was important and was spreading good in the community.

Rachna took us to her home. She is originally from Uttar Pradesh. After marriage, she migrated to this colony. Her husband was earlier playing in a musical band which would perform in the big hotels in Delhi. After the introduction of DJs and latest equipment, the band ran out of work. Today, he does painting jobs. Rachna has four children, all four girls. I asked Rachna if her husband and in-laws were fine with her working since in a community like this, a workingwoman would face her share of difficulties. Rachna replied, "This is good work. I get respect. I have had no problems from either my husband or my in-laws."

After serving us tea at her house, she began taking us around to different houses to meet different people. It was the first time that I was entering an actual slum house and seeing it from the inside. For Moonhwa too, this was the first time.

The houses were mostly single rooms and the expansion was mostly vertical, height-wise. The houses were dark from inside. Most of the houses had television sets. That appears to be the favorite pastime among the people. The residents had tried their best to decorate their houses. Flower vases with plastic flowers, attractive empty talcum powder cases, perfume bottles, all of this was kept in some sort of a showcase where it was most visible to a guest. Normally, a drain would be flowing just outside the houses. But from inside, every possible effort was made to keep the house clean. I was amazed at the meticulous efforts to maintain cleanliness. Some days later, Moonhwa mentioned how she had earlier felt that people from the slums are dirty, but when she had seen the conditions in which they live, her mindset had changed.

For each one of us, our homes are precious. We love our homes. We want to make our houses into homes. Houses are the physical structures; homes make this structure intimate with feeling, emotion, belongingness and effort.

Each house was a story of struggle, each a different struggle, different stories, but somewhere a common thread ran through the stories.

In the first house which we entered, the man of the house was not there. The woman was sitting and handling her two children. She spoke to us how her husband and she were trying to run a bakery. The oven occupied most of the space in the house. In the day, it was an oven. In the night, a mattress would be put over it and it became the bed.

The second house was a bit prosperous. People had just woken up from their sleep when we entered. The head of the house spoke. He was a bus driver. He had three daughters and a son. Two daughters were married and the third was in line after her brother would get married. He had a toothache that morning.

He took pride in saying how his daughters had never really stepped out of home. He felt that girls should stay at home. And then, they have to be married off. Subba chatted with him. Later he told me how it is important to listen to people and respect their views and opinions. We should not try to change people.

Rachna, Moonhwa and I went up to the terrace to use the toilets. The toilet was very clean. Moonhwa queried why each family had so many children. Rachna responded by saying that the men were afraid of family planning because often, the operations and surgeries performed on the women for family planning would result in excessive bleeding and death. Medical facilities for women were very poor and unhygienic. Men are afraid to lose their wives and they therefore do not want family planning at the expense of the lives of their wives. It was quite scary to hear this.

After a round of tea in that house, Rachna took us to another house. There, the breadwinner of the family was dead. His two sons of school-going age were now working at home in order to run the house. Their job was to stitch one part of denim jeans before these went for the final touches in the factory. Each piece fetched a rupee. There were three sons in the family. One had left and the other two were working. Of the two, one had left school to do this work full time while the other would work for the first half of the morning and then go to school in the afternoon. Their mother mentioned, "*Isse kum se kum yeh to padh-likh jayega.*" (In this manner, at least this boy will get educated.)

While it was heartening to see a 15-year-old boy taking responsibility for the entire house, it was disheartening to know that he had to make so many personal sacrifices. Subba praised the boy for his courage and patience. The boy mentioned how both his brother and he really liked Salman Khan (a film star). He said, "*Idhar sabko Salman Khan pasand hai. Who hamara hero hai!*" (Here, everyone likes Salman Khan. He is our hero!)

In the next house, we met with a Hindu lady who had had a love marriage with a Muslim man, but her husband had died. She had no children so she adopted her brother's children. She had recently started a restaurant which served *parathas* (stuffed bread). Subba asked me to ask her how she felt about the unhygienic conditions around her. She said to me, "Who likes to live in filth? You saw us washing clothes right now. We hate to keep our children in dirty clothes. If the baby has dirtied its clothes, we immediately put on new clothes for it. We clean our toilets everyday and keep them spic and span. Try as much as we can, we keep our houses clean because right outside our houses, this drain flows and try as hard as we can, we can't do anything about it. Neither does the government do anything about it. They make promises, only promises."

Outside her house, some of the people were trying to rebuild a temple which was broken down during the Babri Masjid riots. During the riots, Hindus, out of a sense of fear for their lives, had escaped from this colony. Muslims came and made their houses here.

Some of the women were watching us talking. They asked us to come to a house where the young boy of the house had been maimed for life. Some Muslim boys had come and thrown acid on him due to personal enmity. The boy's body was totally burnt and charred. He was living a live death each day.

Moonhwa and I did not have the courage to see him. Subba went and saw him.

Rachna led us out, as it was time for us to leave.

All of us then left for Tribal Welfare Society.

Tribal Welfare society is one of India's leading NGO supporting tribal peoples in India. The society provides support for refugees and looks into their economic development. Tribal Welfare Society was partnering with Global PeaceWorks for this project. They had organized our meeting with the Burmese Refugees. Our dinner was an endeavor to support the economic initiative of the refugees who had now started their own catering, serving Burmese food.

As we washed our hands and freshened up, steaming *momos* (a Tibetan steamed delicacy) were made ready for our lunch. While eating *momos*, Dilp Kolhatkar of the Everest Peace Project arrived. He spoke of his project, an interfaith climb to Mount Everest, scheduled to start in June 2004.

By the time Dilip finished talking, the Burmese Refugees had arrived. We broke into our usual groups of three. Two refugees sat with each group.

In my group, a Burmese boy and girl spoke to us. They mentioned that they fled from Burma owing to religious persecution. They belonged to a tribe called the 'Kachin' tribe. They were not being awarded refugee status by UNHCR. Since they do not have their refugee certificate, they cannot seek employment. Conditions for them are tough. They have to live in small rooms, nearly 10 each in a room, both boys and girls living together. They do not have a source of livelihood. People suspect them. They have no friends in this strange city. And, they are far, far away from their homes and from their loved ones.

As they narrated their stories, we felt their sense of helplessness. Hope is the most powerful human emotion someone once said to me. In their situation, keeping hope alive was in itself an asking task!

Umberto spoke. He narrated his experience with Afghan Refugees. He said, "It is difficult for you, I understand. But my friend, do not become a beggar. You can become beggar in the mind and you will lose your self-esteem. Keep up your integrity and spirit." Umberto spoke of a woman who works in their house. She is a refugee. By doing household chores, she earns her livelihood. She is happy now.

Piya spoke, "If you were in Nepal, I would do something for you immediately. But, from my experiences with the Bhutanese refugees, I can tell you one thing. Make friends, local friends. Ask them to teach you Hindi. Make friends with their families. Try to do odd chores and see if you can seek employment with them."

There was a long drawn silence. This silence can be very awkward, because we can feel the pain, the anxiety, the worry, but there are no words. This is the silence of emotions, of vibes. I have felt this silence when I have sat among Kashmiri women whose children have disappeared. The pain is heavy; the atmosphere is full with the sense of pain. Someone has to speak to break this silence, but who will? Who will have the courage to say the first word, because the first word is also futile!

Titus spoke. His words were strong, just like him. He said, "Let us pray for our friends here that God may help them. I, from my end, will pray for them everyday when I go back home. I am sure the Lord will be there for them."

We held hands and prayed. While we prayed, our throats were choked. It was a mix of pain, hope, oneness, and fraternity, a mingled feeling of all these emotions.

As we disbursed, I felt the pain of 'home-less-ness', having a home somewhere out there and yet, being far, far away from home, from loved ones, in a strange land, where I have to start life all over again, in the prime of my youth.

After that, all of us went to Delhi Haat, a crafts village. We returned in some time to listen to Ela Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi's granddaughter.

Ela Gandhi said that she had no words to say, but that she felt glad about the work that we were doing. She said that she was interested in what we were doing and that we could organize something like this in South Africa where she lives.

After Mrs. Gandhi left, we sat down with bowls of steaming *thukpa* (a Burmese delicacy). While we were at the *thukpa*, a big group started singing. A guitar appeared from somewhere and Titus, in his loud and majestic voice, began to sing hymns and songs. We soon made a big circle. And there was singing. While we were singing, Eric asked us, "Where are our Burmese friends?" We realized that they were sitting inside.

We got them out and urged them to sing. One of the boys began playing the guitar. The others sang. They sang loud and clear, beautifully. Then, they performed a Kachin dance. And finally, they sang a song of home and hope. It was powerful song. It touched the chords inside of us.

Moonhwa was weeping.

The song went on. They sang about how they believed that one day, they would be back home, and as of now, they were living with his hope which was the oxygen of their lives.

After the singing, the Burmese left for their 'houses'. We left for the center.

During the journey that night, I wondered about home.

Reflections from my diary for 11th December:

Today I wondered about home. I have a home, in Mumbai. My parents and my sister live with me. I may not care so much for them while they are around me, but I miss them most when I am away from home.

This morning, I went inside the slums for the first time. I felt a sense of struggle. It was not a pathos-like feeling; I felt that their struggle was similar to that of all of us. Each one of us is struggling to survive, the poor man and the rich man. The poor man is struggling to fulfill his basic needs; the rich man is struggling to satisfy his increasing wants. Before coming to Delhi, I had read an advertisement hoarding which said, "It is only human to want more." It was an advertisement for a car. Somewhere, it justified the idea of wants and the fact that we can keep wanting more, because after all, it is just human to want more! I felt a sense of mockery being made of me when I read this sign.

Today I want to make a decision. I will only stick to my needs. I will be aware of my wants. Maybe, this is the way to sustainability for me.

Listening to the stories of the people in the slums made me feel that life is very colored. It is different for each one of us. I felt a sense of crowding while I was in the slums.

There are so many people, and so little physical space. Crime would be natural in this scenario. When mice are crowded in a cage, they become violent and kill each other. I want to design new spaces, not just with the idea of increasing physical space, but spaces which allow us to meet, both in person and in the mind.

I saw that each one of the houses in the colony was expanded in terms of height. I felt a breathing space, a sense of freedom when I went up to their terraces. There was light up there. There was breeze up there. There was openness up there! It was a liberating feeling!

This afternoon, I met with the Burmese refugees. I have spoken to Kashmiri Pandits who have been displaced from their homes but their displacement, even though it is from their homes, is still in their land, their familiar setting. They are internally displaced. They have their story. And here were the Burmese refugees. They had their story. I was quite moved. I felt for them. I wondered what could I do for them. My immediate feeling in situations like these is, what can I do for these people. While it is important to think for them, at times, the most that I can do is to listen to them. Umberto was talking to me as we were going around Delhi Haat. He said, "Today, we provided them with the space to talk. By talking them out of their situation, they must have felt a sense of unburdening."

I had listened to them. I felt very strongly when Titus pledged to pray for them everyday. He is also doing something.

12th December:

This is one more early morning. We have set out at 7:00 AM. Unlike yesterday when we got breakfast packets to eat in the car, this morning, there is no breakfast. This afternoon, we have invitations from the community to have lunch with some families. And, today, there are many among us who are unwell. How will the day go today? Umberto's sons, Joshua and Jacob, have also joined us today.

We reached Janta Colony. Anthony David guided us to the Mother Teresa home where little children are placed in the care of the Sisters of Charity there. These children are anywhere between few days old to three years old. They come from very poor families and in very dismal conditions. The home takes care of them till they are healthy again and then, the children are returned to their families. This helps to make way for new children who are also in dire need of care.

There several little children in the home. The biggest child amongst us started rolling in the middle of the children. This was Yasiru! He perhaps went mad when he saw so many children. He found his peers! Gradually, each one of us sat with some of the children and started playing. It is said that God's indication of hope for this world is every new baby born, every new flower that blossoms. I wondered about this saying as I saw the children there. After almost an hour of playing, we got back to our worksite.

We are hungry, all of us, but no one is complaining. We are working. Breaking bricks, clearing the worksite, making way for the walls of the structure to come up.

Kesumi Dewi requires a brief mention here. Kesumi is Piya's wife. She is from Singapore. Kesumi was the Great Mother of our group, together with Fazida Razzak, also from Singapore. While Fazida was the taskmaster and she was constantly working both mentally and physically on the group, Kesumi would go up to each one of us and smile and

talk. For me, personally, it was a wonderful experience sharing with this graceful lady. At the worksite, she would be around for everyone, comforting those who needed comfort, smiling always.

Today is our last day at the worksite. We have a little song-and-dance programme with the community this afternoon.

After a brief breakfast at 11:00 AM, we started preparing for the cultural programme which was to start by 1:00 PM.

At 12:00 PM, some of our hosts began to arrive to take us to their houses for lunch. Some of us are unwell. Should they go to have lunch? The choice was left to them.

15 of us decided to go for lunch. I was struck when Chad offered to go to lunch in spite of his bad health. Chad has a spirit. It is his spirit which adds to his persona and makes him a wonderful human being. Chad very emphatically said "Yes!" when I asked him whether he was sure that he wanted to go for lunch, knowing fully well that he may be risking his health.

Piya, Eric and myself went to our hostess Shaheeda's house. Shaheeda was a young girl, younger than me. She had three children.

Eric was looking around, taking pictures in the house. I was looking at Eric. He is such a tall man. He could almost hit the ceiling of this house.

Shaheeda works with Chetanalaya. As Shaheeda was preparing lunch, her colleagues from Chetanalaya were keeping us company. They were also helping her prepare the food. There was a sense of fraternity, of community there.

Piya started with playing with Shaheeda's youngest baby. He spoke, as if he had been feeling this: "I have learnt humility. This is the first time for me, first time doing physical labour, stepping into a house in a slum and eating here. It teaches us humility huh?" Piya spoke with the calm which is characteristic of his voice. I was very touched when I heard this. He seemed to be admitting this to himself not with a sense of shame, but rather with a sense of submission, of realization, of inner change.

Lunch arrived. Rice, dal, cauliflower, salad, chappatis, and love. As we ate, all three of us admitted that this was a very delicious meal. The Dalai Lama has said, "Approach love and cooking with reckless abandon."

After a group photo in the house, we moved to the worksite where the final programme of the day was to take place. Some of us sang songs, some performed dance. The girls from the community danced as well.

Finally that moment came when we had to leave. Anthony David spoke the last words, mentioning how we were an example here and that this example should lead to deeper harmony among the people in the community. We did not complete the structure of the community center, but we did what we had to, what was 'designed' for us to do.

As we were leaving, Anthony David expressed his gratitude to us. Everyone spoke to us. "Come again, do come again," were the only words I heard together with an unspoken feeling of warmth, affection, openness and welcome! 'Come into our worlds, this is your place,' were the unspoken words I heard.

As we sat in our jeeps, the children came running to the car. We were surrounded by people, swarms of people. As the car started moving, one of the little girls from the community ran with the moving vehicle and held out her hand to Erica to shake hands. Maybe she liked Erica a lot. She wanted to give a gift to Erica before Erica left finally. She took off her hair clip and thrust it happily into Erica's hands. It was not the most extraordinary hair clip, but the sentiment behind it was extraordinary. Perhaps this hairclip was this girl's most cherished possession and she wanted to give it to Erica, symbolizing giving a part of herself. And she gave her hairclip, perhaps telling Erica, "I hope this will remind you of me!"

From here, we proceeded to the Art of Living Foundation. We got an introduction into Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's philosophy. The caretakers taught us some relaxation and meditation exercises which helped us.

We then moved to Ansel Plaza, a shopping complex in uptown Delhi. The idea was to unwind, after a long, long day.

From Ansel Plaza, we proceeded for our last dinner together at the center. After dinner, Eric spoke. He said, "I wish to apologize to each one of you for some of the rushes that we have had to put you through. I want to thank each one of you for staying together, being with each other and working together in spite of the difficulties and hiccups." He then mentioned each person's name individually and thanked each person for his or her unique contribution to the group and to the programme.

After this, the team leaders met with Khorrum, Eric and Fazida, to discuss the plan for the last two days. Our task in each of our groups was to find out if there was some dissatisfaction, some discontent, which could be addressed immediately in the next day. The attempt was to end on a good note, on a contented tone.

Perhaps in each one of our groups we had a lot of things to say about how the programme ought to be improved. But each one of us affirmed that we had had a wonderful experience and the fact that since this was the first time for Global PeaceWorks, there was always a chance to better things next time.

Dinesha, Chad and myself went back and reported this to Khorrum, Eric and Fazida. Chad spoke, "I want to end with affirmation. I want to go back with positive feelings and thoughts. I am going to wash people's feet tomorrow. This is my offering, my gift!"

We recognized that sharing our experience and even having the chance to talk about the programme in an evaluative manner as the whole group was critical. Dinesha took on the responsibility to facilitate the session at breakfast next morning.

Tomorrow, we are setting off to Mehrauli to visit Gobind Sadan. Thereafter, some of us will stay back at Gobind Sadan Ashram while the others will come back to the center for their trip to the Taj Mahal. Tomorrow is our last day together. Tomorrow night, we close ...

Reflections from my diary for 12th December:

Tonight I am experiencing something strange. There has been mismanagement in the programme, but then, each one of us has loved every bit of it. Each one of us is taking something back home.

How will it be tomorrow? Tomorrow, when we all part? Today was slightly heavy. We had to take leave from the community which gave us so much in terms of love, relationships, reflection, growth. Will I ever come back here? I am feeling heavy. I need to sleep ...

13th December:

So, here we are today, the last day for all of us. This morning is our last breakfast together.

Dinesha is here. She is carrying two leaves in her hands. She says, "Hullo!" Everybody replies "Hi!" She says "Hullo, hullo" and we reply, "Hi, hi". This was a practice which Fazida had introduced from the day she had arrived. It helps to get everybody's attention when there is chaos and you need to call people's attention all at once.

Dinesha continued, "This morning, we are going to talk about our personal experiences and the feelings we have had about the programme. Each one has three minutes to speak. I have two leaves in my hands. The moment you are done with two minutes, I am going to raise the first leaf which will indicate that you have one more minute left. When I raise the second leaf, it will mean time-up for the person speaking. In this way, all of us will have a chance to say something."

Moonhwa spoke first. She said:

"I have never entered a slum house before. My parents do this often, but I avoid it. I did not want to go for the house visits on the 11th. But I had to go. I have always felt that slum people are dirty. But when I went to people's houses there, I realized they really can't do much about the dirt and filth. They are clean; they try to keep clean."

"On that evening, I heard the Burmese speak. I felt about their agony for their home. I am from Britain and the last time I went there was when I was four. I haven't been there after that. That evening, when the Burmese refugees sang and had a good time, I felt after how many days did they have such a chance to sing and be happy? I felt something very deep and I cried."

"I am thankful for this opportunity."

Titus spoke. He said:

[I am quoting from Titus's email in which he repeated what he had said that morning and also what did when he got back.]

"As a strong Christian, I never entered any other temples or mosques in the past 43 years. It is the tall and majestic man Eric who inspired me to enter into a Sikh temple and a Muslim mosque in New Delhi. I am happy about it. This inspiration made me to do another thing at the time of Christmas. I am going to a Hindu priest, a Muslim priest and a Jain priest with the Christmas cake. I feel that it is good to have friendship and fellowship with

them too. I respect all religions, keeping my religion in my heart. It takes time for me to come out fully like you. Maybe it is good to attend such programmes in future.

Thank you very much.”

Piya spoke. He said:

“I learnt three things from this experience.

1). Respect – for other faiths and religions

2). Humility – through the experience in Janta colony

3). Patience – inspite of the changing programme, no breakfast one morning, it can be so difficult no? But we stuck together, stayed together, and our patience paid results.”

Kesumi spoke. She said:

“This morning when I woke up, I did not feel like getting out of the bed. I was telling Piya, ‘what have we done? What have we given to this group? I am feeling ashamed!’ But at that moment, Eric’s face came before me and he seemed to say, ‘It doesn’t matter. You have done your bit.’ I took heart from these words and woke up.

I have had a wonderful opportunity being with all of you. Perhaps I am the oldest here, but I never felt excluded. I love you all.”

Each one of us spoke, exactly for three minutes. I was watching all our faces. There was a beautiful shine and clarity on each of our faces. I almost felt that some negativities had walked out of us and an emptiness took over. This morning, we were community.

“Something has come out, something has gone in. Something has become empty, something has been filled in”. These were my words at the breakfast table.

After breakfast, we proceeded to visit a Hindu Temple. Thereafter, we went the Lotus Temple, the house of the Bahá’ís. Here too, we received a warm welcome. We sat in the temple for a while and then went to the information house where apart from being served tea, we spoke with some of the volunteers there about their experiences.

Thereafter, we went to our final destination, the Gobind Sadan Ashram in Mehrauli.

Gobind Sadan Ashram is an interfaith house. Mary Pat Fisher welcomed us lovingly on behalf of the community. We sat down for a sumptuous lunch.

The Burmese refugees had joined us that day.

After lunch, we proceeded to visit the Sikh temple there. We went through the farms and finally reached the site where a statue of Jesus is built. Every evening, there is a candle lighting ceremony here.

It was afternoon. We sat around the statue of Jesus. Fazida spoke. "These are our last few moments together. Now, as Chad has offered, we will wash each other's feet. There is no compulsion. If you do not wish to have your feet washed, it is fine. Chad will now explain the significance of this exercise."

Chad took over. "Jesus, on the final day had said, 'I wish to serve you my followers. Let me wash your feet.' The followers were surprised. They said, 'how can you Lord?' Jesus said, 'why not?'" "We will do the same amongst ourselves. This is fellowship."

Fazida said, "After this, we will gather again for our final closing session. Come team leaders, let's start with you."

Saying this, Eric washed Chad's feet, Khorrum washed Dinesha's and Fazida washed mine.

I decided to wash Gayatri's feet. Gayatri and me had not spoken throughout the programme, each because of our own assumptions and misunderstandings. This morning, just before the start of breakfast, we had begun to talk to each other. I felt that by washing Gayatri's feet, I would not only atone for my doing, but would also clean the dust which had settled on my heart.

I led Gayatri by her hand as I washed her feet. I felt the love inside her through her feet. She was weeping. She lifted me up and said loudly, "I love you." I could not repeat these words to her. It was too difficult to speak. She kept repeating "I love you, I love you!" And for all those moments, I could only feel our presence as we hugged each other and cried.

Eric rushed to wash Subba's feet when he saw Subba standing. Subba felt very uncomfortable. Later, when he spoke of his experience, he said, "I felt very embarrassed. Here is Eric, a white man. He has such clean feet. And here I am, a dark-skinned fellow. My feet are so dirty. When Eric saw me standing, he ran and grabbed my feet. I felt this white man is touching my dirty feet. I felt very bad. I had judged Eric. But he is a good man."

Each one of us had our own experiences while washing each other's feet. Some of us were laughing and giggling. Others were crying.

We gathered again. Fazida said, "Now, take these blank sheets of paper and write a letter to yourselves. Go and sit by yourself. Choose any corner. If you wish to sit with others, do so. But if someone wishes to sit alone, respect that person's wishes. After you have finished writing this letter, put it in this envelope and put your address on the envelope. Six months later, exactly on this date, we will post this letter to you."

We sat by ourselves, wrote our letters and came together again. We sat in a circle and shared our experiences again. Subba spoke, Myunghee spoke. Some of us couldn't speak at all.

We then went to the mosque to offer prayers.

After tea, we proceeded for the candle lighting ceremony and singing around the statue of Jesus. Finally, we went for a meeting with Babaji who heads the Ashram.

Babaji was a grand old man. He spoke to us about the importance of meditation and looking inside ourselves. He said that the first person to change is oneself. After talking to us, he distributed copies of the '*Jaap Sahib*' (meditation booklet). He blessed us and said,

"This is a very playful and lovely group." As we took a group photo with him, he kept blessing us.

We proceeded for dinner after which the community organized a dance troupe for us. The troupe performed *bhangra* (Punjabi folk dance) for us. All of us joined in the dance.

Then, each one of us performed individually. Erica, Kesumi and Dinesha gave dance performances. Moonhwa, Subba, Fazida and Ricky, each sang a song. Eric gave the performance of the evening. He mimed the entire process of how the programme was arranged, starting with the initial email communication, to every bit of the programme. Subba commented that Eric could seriously consider miming as an alternative career!

We closed with a Sufi song and dance where the women stood in the inner circle and the men rotated to the left in the outer circle. We sang to each other, "To you I give, from you I receive, together by love we live." With this group activity, we finally closed.

Jeeps left with a large part of the group while some of us stayed back. From tomorrow, we disburse ...

Reflections from my diary for 13th December:

I was sitting in the Bahai temple today. It was like a church from inside. While I was sitting there, I was wondering about congregation. Sitting inside a temple, I congregate with other people and express my faith. When I sit amidst the mountains in Kashmir, I congregate with nature. In the midst of the mountains, I celebrate my significant insignificance and my insignificant significance. Kashmir is my mosque, temple and church.

When I congregate inside a concrete structure, I feel that I am expressing my faith together with other people who have also come here to express their faith. This adds to the collective pool of faith in the universe. Do I need to think of a new vision of the kind of structures that we have around us and need to build?

Today, when I was writing the letter to myself, I found that I had selected a corner where I was facing the mosque. This was not a conscious choice. It was just an accidental coincidence!!! I have always had a problem with mosques and with the concept of God. More than problem, I have had an ego conflict. Today, when I was facing the mosque, I felt that I had transcended the 'I' that makes up my ego. Subba mentioned that there is a good side to religion too. I believed in those words when I looked at the mosque.

Today, when I prayed in the mosque with everyone else, I felt a deep sense of peace. In the earlier times, going to a mosque meant a volcano rising inside me. I have rarely felt peaceful inside a mosque. But today was different. Some switch has turned off in me and some switch has turned on. I don't think I am going the religious way. But maybe what I have discovered is a spiritual path. I realized today that if I can be open in my heart and mind, open to receive, Providence gives and it gives everything. I have learnt the value of openness.

Mary was talking to me. She spoke about faith. I realized that for a lot of us, religion is a way to faith. It is one of the steps in the ladder towards faith. When one develops an internal identity and discovers the path of spirituality, then religion becomes one of the means of expressing faith rather than being 'the only' means. A sense of respect, faith and celebration develops within.

From tomorrow, we are all going to move to our homes. What are we carrying back with us? I am carrying back with me a new understanding of myself, of people, of religion, of interfaith and interreligious communication and dialogue and a lot more than what I can write here now. Each one of us has experienced some change and each one of us will stay together inspite of the physical distances. We have created bonds, bonds which will not melt so easily with time and with distance.

I am growing ...

Afterwards ...

On the 14th, one group went to Agra. Those of us who stayed back did our own thing. Some went shopping. Some of us met again at Umberto's house.

On the 15th, when most of us were leaving for our homes, we promised to stay in touch and to enhance this experience. We pledged to support each other in our respective endeavors. And this promise has stayed. Even today, nearly a fortnight after we are all back home, our email accounts are full with emails from everyone. Here is one email from Harkirat.

"Hi! Friends

Hope this e-mail finds you all in good health.

I am very thankful to you all who are everyday sending so many e-mails to us. It is good to see that we all are so far from everyone but your words, messages, faces and things what we shared all remain in my heart.

Every time I read your e-mails, your faces come in front of my eyes and it brings a lot of happiness to me. Wish you all and also to your family members a Merry Christmas and hope that all your Christmas dreams come true and may god bless you.

It was good to share beautiful thoughts with you all during the seminar. Sorry, I can't write more because it is very difficult for me to express my views.

Thanking You All

Harkirat Singh"

We want to continue with this experience, perhaps taking it forward to more people. I remember Scott Peck writing in his book "The Different Drum". He said that community is the answer to world peace. I felt it in this experience.

There is a way forward, for each one of us who was here. Let us see where we go ...

I conclude with Eric's email to us:

"Dear Friends,

Many of us had a deep experience of oneness with each other and a deep sense of hope for humanity through our shared experience in Delhi. The self-sacrifice each of you showed in coming to Delhi - often at great expense - and the sacrificial work you performed for a community in need of love, is a mark of great virtue.

Yet each of us returns home now to our families and everyday affairs. This is very hard for me as I prefer to be with all of you and with the many others who share our concerns. It is hard to come home and face the everyday realities of the mundane. Let us keep up our love and hopes for the future. Let's recreate this experience wherever we can. And while many people will ask "How was it?" We knew that this experience could not be easily shared in words. It was an experience to be known by experience ...

Lastly, as most of you know, this is Christmas week - so to all I wish a joyous holiday in remembering Jesus - the prophet, the sage, or as Christians call him - God's beloved son. I think you are all God's beloved children and I wish you the greatest love and joy in this time.

Please keep in touch with each other and remember that we have no boundaries, no borders for the love we share.

Fondly,
Eric

Some of the emails:

From Umberto:

"Dear Eric and all.

I would like to thank all of you for the beautiful experience we shared together during our Global Peace Works project in Delhi. I feel that each one of you brought an essential aspect in the project and also in my own personal life, thank you.

I'm now preparing for Christmas and other celebrations with my family. My children are sending their greetings to you and wish to keep in contact.

I'm also busy preparing for my next trip to Kabul. I will let you know more about it.

I wish to all of you and your families lots of joy and peace and many blessings from Heaven.

Sincerely, your brother Umberto

PS. Let's keep in touch.

From Khorrum about his experience in Janta Colony when he went there after all of us had left:

Dear All,

This afternoon Shakeel and I went to Janta colony to give away the donations offered by many of you. Thanks to all of you.

The walls of the ground floor are up and they were preparing to cast the roof. Fr. Anthony was happy to see us there, same with children and a few other ladies. Their smiling faces lit up and we could feel the appreciation in their eyes.

I hope I am able to go there more often in future too and I am sure they will always receive me with open hearts and wide arms. But the real credit for this goes to all of you more than anyone else, as you were the ones who had actually sweated out there and earned their love and thanks.

Hope all of you have reached back home safely. Please keep in touch.

MERRY CHRISTMAS & HAPPY NEW YEAR

More later,

Khorrum

Juliette's email:

" ...

I'm thinking of all of you too. Subba, I hope you reached sweet home by now. Gayatri and Ammu, you gave one of the most important lessons to me: to never waste any moment of one's life with sadness and worries, but to always share happiness with people we love. For our common time in Delhi, we all shared our happiness, shared also sadness and worries so that they turned into happiness. It is friendship. No need to talk about peace when you simply love.

Why do religious institutions too often fail in giving this message, the only message? But how can you give this message to people when they are torn by existential problems, when they are by their own struggle for survival blinded from others' very same struggle? When you are at war with destiny, it becomes hard to live in peace.

We had a great time, learning a lot and developing within our team such a great dynamic. I think that we could build upon this, develop something further, create all together something for the future in order to really use our common potential and change something. There was a great power out of our coming together. Thanks to every single one of us. I had never thought of people all being so different and unique from each other and everyone in his diversity being so amazing! Thanks also to all those who helped me on the last day to leave Delhi safely - and that too happily! Best wishes and prayers for Christmas to all of you.

Love,
Juliette"

From Myunghee:

"Hello! My beautiful people,

What's up? I am so slow when it comes to checking my email. (Eric you know I am) Well I just wanted to say thank you to you all for your warm wishes. I truly enjoyed your company and friendship and I can't ever forget the good times and laughs we had together. No matter where I am in this crazy world, I will always have the memory of my friends so that I will never be lonely. Thanks for a life changing experience and for opening my mind and heart to see the real beauties in life: compassion, service, and friendship. I really hope to see you guys again some time and no matter where you are (especially in New York City), you always have a friend. Much love, light and happiness to you all and may the Creator bless you in all the many wonderful things that you do.

Love
Myunghee"

From Erica:

"Hello all!!!

I'm glad to hear that everyone is reaching back home safely. I already miss you all and reflecting back on all we did and saw has been a roller-coaster ride for my emotions. I am sure we are all experiencing similar feelings as we attempt to answer the recurring questions of "How was it?" and "What did you do?" As I was glancing through some of the pictures last night, I had the common experience of not knowing whether to cry or smile - so, I did both. Yet it was all in happiness, as it is the mixture of universal emotions that tie our bonds and will hopefully allow our paths to all meet again. Please take care and have a wonderful, love-filled holiday.

With love, Erica"

From Chad

“Hope you all made it home safe and sound.
Upon arriving home, I slept for 19 hours! I have never done that before.
I still feel like I am living in a fog.
Thanks to all of you for making this faith journey so wonderful.
I prayed for a deep impact experience, and that is exactly what I got!
Peace and love,
PC”