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Peace making

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Jun. 12, 2009 NCR Today

On Feb. 18, 2003, I returned from the Berlin International Film Festival where I had served on the Ecumenical Jury. I wrote to my egroup Cine&Media [1]:

> "I returned to the hotel after a day visiting museums and "Check Point Charlie" to pack and hit the sack early since I had to rise at 3:30 a.m. From Berlin this morning we flew to Frankfurt to change for the non-stop flight to Los Angeles. The waiting area was full of traditionally dressed Muslims returning from the Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, that every Muslim seeks to make at least once in his or her life. It was full winter outside and the long pilgrimage, that takes place about three months after the month of Ramadan, must have been exhausting for these fellow Angelinos.
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> "As we were waiting for the flight to board, one poor woman had a grand mal seizure, and so the medics came and then her luggage had to be removed from the plane. Thank God it happened there rather than in-flight so she could have care.
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> "As we were lining up to board the plane after a significant delay, one young Muslim woman was moving persistently through the crowd to the front, pulling an elderly woman behind her who was limping. The young woman got to the front of the line and asked to be let on because the older woman needed time to get down the jet way. But an older Muslim man shouted with sarcasm, 'Go ahead, go ahead! Everybody just get in front!' The young woman got really mad and yelled back at him. They got into quite an argument and it kept getting louder. I thought for sure the airline people were going to do something. The young woman pled loudly, 'Please, my mother-in-law has a fracture in her foot, she has to sit down.' In fact, all that the woman wanted was for her mother-in-law to sit outside the jet way and not have to stand in line. The airline attendant let her on, but the old man didn't let up his tirade. As they went through the gate, the young woman yelled back at the man, 'You just came from Hajj! You are supposed to do acts of kindness! Not be mean like this!'
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> "On the plane, the two women sat across from me, and I said to the young woman, 'Well, you certainly told the man off!' thinking I was complimenting her because she was hassled and showed such concern for her mother-in-law. But she said to me, 'Was I too loud? Was I too strong?' I told her I thought she was fine, after all. ... But when the older man and his wife passed our seats, the young woman and the man both started apologizing to one another. Making peace."

Three Cups of Tea, a *New York Times* bestseller by Greg Mortensen with David Oliver Relin (2007, Penguin), is a book about making peace. It tells the story of the mountain-climber Greg Mortensen who gave up scaling peaks after a failed K2 attempt in 1993. On his descent he became lost and was found and cared for by the local people. He looked around and saw a need. He decided to build schools to educate girls in the remote northern regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Mortensen and the network of people of the Central Asia Institute [2] he co-founded, know that education is the key to peace. "If girls can just get to a fifth-grade level, everything changes."

Three Cups of Tea is now at the top of my favorite book list.

The authors point out that the intense and indiscriminate bombing of Afghanistan in the months after 9/11 and the killing of innocent people in the Iraq War have helped create new generations of terrorists. But Mortensen persists in his belief in the promise that education, especially of girls, brings progress to people, families, and communities, leading to peace within and among nations. Teaching reading, writing, math, history, and their languages, gives girls and young women the foundation to go further into health care, education, and commerce. Constructing workshops for women so they can begin micro industries, and in one case, building a bridge, has become part of an ever-expanding peace initiative started by one man.

Mortensen is always learning from the wisdom of the people he meets, especially village leaders, the men, with whom he has to deal with first of all. This way he respects the culture of the people and he makes himself one with them as he offers all opportunities for progress.

It is interesting that Hollywood makes movies about war but few about peace. The recent war-themed movies, even those that are insightful and important, haven't done so well commercially. Maybe Hollywood needs to give peace a chance.

This morning, when I finished reading *Three Cups of Tea*, I thought of my experience at the Frankfurt International Airport that day long ago. I reflected on the cultural perspective that I brought to that encounter: I thought I was supporting the young woman in front of a domineering and rude man. But I didn't have a clue about the spiritual reality of Muslims or how seriously they take their faith in relationship to others. Instead, I hope I learned wisdom from her strength when she ignored me to do the better thing: make peace.

A postscript:

Today I previewed a documentary about Afghanistan's version of "American Idol," "Afghan Star" (July 29 release in LA and NY). Though hugely popular, the show puts the country's diverse ethnic and Islamic cultures and social mores in conflict just the same. More about this film later, but its theme is that after 30 years of war, Afghanistan wants to move from guns to music. Popular culture and commercialization of talent is a form of education as well. I wonder what Greg Mortensen would say.

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