



**Mennonite  
Mission  
Network**

The mission agency of  
Mennonite Church USA

# Missio Dei

Exploring God's work in the world

## For God so loved Afghanistan



Journal selections from 16 years of  
family living in a war-torn land

BY STEVE AND SHERYL MARTIN

Missio Dei #21

James R. Krabill, series editor

*Missio Dei* is published by Mennonite Mission Network to invite reflection and dialogue about God's mission in today's world. Some features in the series focus primarily on the biblical and theological foundations of the mission task. Others present ministry case studies or personal stories of attempts to be faithful to Christ's call. Perspectives represented reflect the passion and commitment of the agency: to declare in word and demonstrate in life the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, "across the street, all through the marketplaces, and around the world."

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Mennonite Mission Network, the mission agency of Mennonite Church USA, exists to lead, mobilize and equip the church to participate in holistic witness to Jesus Christ in a broken world. With offices in Elkhart, Ind., and Newton, Kan., Mission Network supports ministries in more than 45 countries and 24 U.S. states.

Mission Network is committed as an agency to providing relevant resources for the church. *Missio Dei* is such a resource, inviting reflection and conversation about God's mission in 21st-century contexts. It is offered free of charge to nearly 1,000 pastors and lay leader subscribers. Additional copies may be purchased for \$3.95 each, or \$2.95 for quantities over 100.

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# Foreword

Afghanistan is a beautiful, friendly and terrifying nation. While it flew below the international radar screen for many years, Afghanistan emerged in the late 1970s as a place with global strategic importance, and has been in turmoil ever since. In Afghanistan's modern history, Christian presence goes back only a few years, to the 1960s.

This means that expatriate followers of Jesus living and serving in the country have been walking with the Afghan people during a very crucial and difficult time. It has not been an easy walk, and such workers have been called upon to fill a wide variety of roles, sometimes providing funds, other times administrative staff, and in still other instances, nurses, doctors, engineers, teachers and musicians.

Mennonites helped to network Afghan partners with like-minded people around the world. Workers included younger folks just out of college, retired persons, professionals in their prime, and the young couple whose story you are about to experience in the following pages.

The land area known as Afghanistan is located in central Asia with strategic importance to Russia, Pakistan, India, Iran, the United States, China and other regional powers. The country has long been impossible for foreign powers to rule, but many have attempted to exert control via proxies or by pulling economic and military levers.

The recent international visibility dates to a coup in 1973 when a military general took power from the constitutional monarch, King Zahir Shah, and sent him into exile. Subsequently, internal conflict heated up, leading to the Soviet Union sending in troops in 1979 to support a leftist government. Soon afterward, various Western governments began to arm and otherwise support conservative Islamic and ethnic groups,

known as Mujahideen, in their struggle to oust the Soviets and the left-leaning Afghan government.

Steve and Sheryl Martin entered the picture after the Soviets left at the end of the 1980s, but while the leftist government of Najibullah remained hunkered down in the capital city of Kabul, surrounded by various Mujahideen militias. The Martins joined the local work of a long-time Mennonite Mission Network partner—a consortium of churches and faith-based agencies that has served in this nation where no local church existed.

Steve and Sheryl filled a variety of functions in the organization, and experienced the terror and powerlessness of those frightening Mujahideen days with rockets hitting Kabul in regular waves. They also experienced more settled times, though the relative peace came at the cost of enduring the fundamentalist control of the Taliban. The Martins escaped some dicey situations—they were outside of the country when Christian humanitarian aid workers were expelled—and then experienced the slightly more stable situation under the Hamid Karzai regime, beginning in late 2004.

Mennonite Mission Network recognizes all of its long-term workers for the good work that they do. But most are not in the kind of spiritual, political, military and social pressure cooker that has been Afghanistan. Indeed, as the security situation has deteriorated in recent years, some former co-workers have been kidnapped or killed. Yet others remain with their calling from God, and their joy in relating to Afghan friends is far deeper than any fear.

Steve and Sheryl Martin are now living in the United States with their three children, Sara, Micah and Elizabeth. We at Mennonite Mission Network still remember them for their extraordinary ability to roll with the changes, for their choice to start a family in a dangerous and unstable place, and for their sensitive handling of uncertain and arbitrary government relationships. Above all, the Martins tried to be where God was at work in Afghanistan, seeking to do their part in bringing healing and hope in this challenging context.

*John Lapp  
Director for Asia and the Middle East  
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# For God so loved Afghanistan

Journal selections from 16 years of family  
living in a war-torn land

Steve and Sheryl Martin

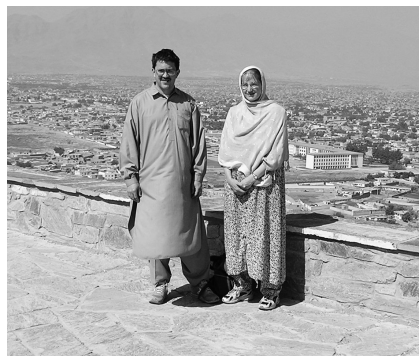
*What he opens no one can shut and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.*

—Revelation 3:7b-8

## No turning back!

(Sheryl—September 22, 1991)<sup>1</sup>

As we descended into Kabul with a corkscrew spiral between the mountains, I felt it in the pit of my stomach—no turning back now! The cool yet sunny, dry atmosphere greeted us like a breath of fresh air as we disembarked. This scene contrasted with the exhausting previous days that we had spent



Steve and Sheryl on the old city wall above Kabul, 2006

<sup>1</sup> All Afghan names have been changed throughout the text to protect anonymity. Afghan Persian proverbs appear in a phonetic English script.

in hot and humid Delhi fending off rickshaw drivers and shopkeepers. The airport, mountains and fields all blended into a dusty gray, and yet I felt an overwhelming sense of peace and rightness in my being about our arrival. We were warmly greeted by a Canadian Mennonite who proceeded to guide us through the paperwork in customs. This was just the beginning of the expatriate team taking us under their wing, welcoming us, and helping us through the hurdles of life in Afghanistan.

## Learning social cues

(Sheryl—September 28, 1991)

We were relaxing in the late afternoon sun in our backyard when a woman with dark curly hair appeared on the balcony next door. “Salaam!” she greeted us. We “salaamed” back and immediately exhausted our language ability! Then the woman switched into basic English: “Welcome! Come drink tea.” Steve and I looked at each other in amazement, surprised by this spontaneous invitation. We had been told that Afghans tend to be suspicious of foreigners and that it would take us a long time to meet our neighbors.

We decided to accept the offer and hurried over to our neighbor’s house. She met us at the door and graciously seated us in a carpeted room. The only “furniture” was large comfy floor cushions along the walls with embroidered pillows for our backs. Soon, tea arrived, steaming black tea in delicate china cups with sweets accompanying it. Various family members and children came and went, taking a good look at the new foreigners!

We had an interesting time communicating as our hostess’s English was very simple and our Dari Persian was, of course, non-existent! Just as we were wondering how to graciously make our exit, our hostess invited us to stay for supper! Wow, we thought, this is superb hospitality—we must be making a good impression on them! As we didn’t have any other plans, we stayed.

Soon the neighbors brought out *naan* (Afghan flat bread) and a simple vegetable soup, accompanied by profuse apologies: “Sorry, we have only soup, but next time we will make rice pilau and dumplings and meat and chips ...” It was somewhere about then that we realized we had missed the social cues and were overstaying our welcome! We shared the soup together, hearing many repeats of how they would cook us a feast the next time when they “knew” we were coming. Even then, we were unsure of

the proper protocol for politely excusing ourselves. Finally, after a few more cups of tea, we mumbled our thanks and made our exit.

## The “three times” rule

(Sheryl—September 30, 1991)

As we have now started language study, we are also having cultural lessons. Today, we learned the “three times” rule: *A sincere invitation is repeated three times and must be politely refused the first two times.* Oops! Our neighbors were not offended, however, by our misunderstanding of the cultural cues. True to their word, they invited us back to their home for a meal with all the “fixin’s.” And this time we knew enough “proper” words to compliment them and to know when to leave!

## The Mujahideen take Kabul

(Steve—April 1992)

Yesterday, I was home for lunch in our upstairs apartment, intently listening to the radio news from the British Broadcasting Company (BBC). For the last several weeks, large areas of the country have been daily turning over from the Afghan communist government to the Mujahideen—Afghan freedom fighters. The Mujahideen have been fighting the communist government for more than a decade now. As I listened to the broadcast, the reporter was talking about the Mujahideen approaching the outskirts of Kabul.

Suddenly, I heard a fast moving vehicle passing down our street. As I looked out the upstairs window, I saw a pickup truck laden with heavily armed men, scarves wrapped around their heads. They drove past our house toward the military checkpoint at the end of the street. Expecting a firefight to break out, I held my breath only to be amazed at the quietness that ensued. The uniformed men at the checkpoint handed over their weapons, fled, or simply changed sides without a shot being fired.

The scene repeated itself multiple times around the capital as this large sprawling city, after years of fighting, fell to the Mujahideen with hardly a shot being fired. It was an exhilarating experience in some ways to be part of an unfolding story coming to us direct on BBC!



Sheryl shops in Kabul.

Today, I visited a young man on the street who has become a friend of ours over the last six months. He has lived his entire life in this neighborhood and, like many of the Afghans around us, is tired of the ongoing civil war. For years, people have heard of the “freedom fighters,” and now that they have arrived, folks are elated to finally be rid of the current regime. Surely, with one side defeated, everyone thought, life would finally return to some kind of normalcy. As my friend and I talked, he smiled and stated that now that the freedom fighters had arrived, life would become peaceful and people would be able to live a worry-free life.

I do not want to dampen his spirit and I pray that he is right. However, listening today to the BBC and to some of the long-term expatriate perspectives, I wonder if this is really the end of the troubles, or, perhaps instead—given the serious rifts between the groups who have jointly taken over the city—if it is only the *beginning*.



Women in Mazar-e-Sharif

## “Mennonite bandages”

(Sheryl—1993)

There has been so much infighting between the various Mujahideen groups. The Maternal Child Health (MCH) clinic I work at started treating the war-wounded, as well as continuing medical care for babies and check-ups for pregnant women. We received a container full of cloth strip rolled bandages from Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), which we promptly nicknamed “Mennonite bandages.” This shipment is so helpful, as we have limited medical supplies at times.



Because of the fighting, it is hard to get medicines and bandages through the border. One injured woman had a deep, jagged and dirty shrapnel wound in her upper thigh. We urged her to go to the local hospital to have it surgically cleaned. She sighed and told us that her husband wouldn't give her permission to go to the hospital, as there are male physicians there. Like many conservative men, this man didn't want his wife to be seen or touched by other men, even physicians. As our MCH clinic had an all-female staff of Afghan and expatriate nurses, physicians and midwives, the woman could only come to *our* clinic. We cleaned and dressed her leg for several weeks and, amazingly, she healed.

The city of Kabul has been divided between Mujahideen factions since the early 1990s and so we can't travel very far without crossing a front line. The various militia posts know we are medical people and will ask for eye ointment and medical supplies. So we started carrying "Mennonite bandages" and handing them out to the soldiers on the front line. Now they allow us to continue on our way without hassle. The soldiers quickly recognize our car and they start motioning, hand over hand, for bandages as soon as they see us approaching!

## Personal encounters—at the hospital, on the bus, in the neighborhood

(*Sheryl—1993*)

It all begins so subtly.

Stares on the street, then nasty words exchanged.

Failure to try to communicate with those different from oneself.

Then the "taking" starts. They mount the bus.

"*Aoghan as?*" ("Are there any Pushtuns here?") "*Panjsheri as?*" ("Are there Panjsheris?") "*Hazara as?*" ("Are there Hazaras?")

Men go missing. They show up days later, if they are lucky.

Faces bruised, ribs broken.

Rockets start flying, bullets whiz by.

An innocent baby—a bullet in his brain.

A small girl crying as jagged shrapnel is pulled out of her tender young hand.

A teenager breathes his last as his nose bleeds gray matter.

Families desperate, running anywhere to escape. But escape is nowhere to be found.

A tough young soldier in battle fatigued with a string of ammunition around his chest cries like a baby as his buddy, ashen gray, breathing shallow, finally slips away forever.

Two small children on our street become fatherless.

A young girl's dreams are shattered like her spinal cord when a stray bullet enters it.

We cry, "God, where are you? Where is justice? When will this evil and terror stop? Will you hide your face forever from the Afghan people?"

Yet, in all of this despair, there are a few glimmers of hope:

- A poor Hazara worker and a highly respected Pashtun teacher walk home together to protect each other.
- Two female co-workers walk arm-in-arm, vowing friendship even as males in their differing ethnic groups plot against each other.
- A young Uzbek man falls in love with a young Pashtun woman, and they plead for three years with their families for acceptance. Their persistence and love for each other wins and they are finally happily married.
- Two wealthy, elite young men find a friend in an older, working-class man, and the three, from different ethnic groups, drink tea and chat together for hours.

"Eternity has been set in the hearts of these people."

## Two divergent paths ... coming together

*(Steve—August 1993)*

Today, a colleague and I were traveling in a rented taxi between two cities in northern Afghanistan. I was observing the scenery around me—scenery that could not have contrasted more from my home community in central Indiana or from the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia where Sheryl and I had made our home for six years before coming to Afghanistan. Far from the lush green fields I was accustomed to, we were traveling today through hot, dusty desert land prone to blinding sandstorms. Instead of pleasant, rolling mountains in the distance, we were approaching high and stark majestic peaks suddenly thrust upon us from the desert floor. How could these two worlds be so different, I wondered? How could I even begin to connect with the people we were called here to serve?

Suddenly, just ahead of us, our taxi was flagged down by a lone gunman. As we stopped, the gunman requested—Is it a *request* if you’re holding an automatic weapon?—to be taken further up the road. We begrudgingly made additional room by squeezing him and his weapon into the backseat beside us. As we continued on our journey, we engaged him with the usual Afghan hospitality greetings, using our limited language in conversation. As time passed, I took a closer look at our “guest.” Much to my shock, he looked familiar—thin build, scraggly beard with narrow chin—much like many men from my own extended family back in the States. He was from a large ethnic group in Afghanistan who had descended from Alexander the Great, an Aryan. People from this ethnicity proudly identify themselves with Europeans, particularly Germans, who likewise come from the Aryan background.

I suddenly realized that somewhere in our backgrounds, hundreds of years ago, his family path and my biological ancestors diverged on a road. One path eventually led to Swiss-German roots in the Anabaptist tradition and years later landed in the United States with many choices in life—including the freedom to choose nonviolence as a way of life. The other path led elsewhere, in many instances to war and conquest, and those who followed that path never returned from the exploits and conquests of their founding father, the famous young warrior, Alexander of Macedon.

Now, years later, the family taking the second path is still living with violent conflict all around—conflict that has claimed the lives of millions throughout this land, including many of its own ethnic family members. Was the remarkable divergence in these two stories the result of dramatic, deliberate and conscious choices, or was it rather the consequence of myriads of everyday decisions made in countless small steps along life’s way?

As I contemplated this reality, I was intrigued and amused by the ludicrous paths God had caused me to cross. Here I was, a sheltered and naïve Mennonite guy, in the middle of a country halfway around the world, in the back seat of a taxi nestled between a Presbyterian to my right and, on my left, a man carrying a loaded AK-47—a man who, standing in a lineup, could easily pass for one of my German Amish relatives. How could our worlds be so similar, I suddenly wondered? How could I *not* connect, serve and learn to love these people around me?

**Afghan Persian  
proverb:**

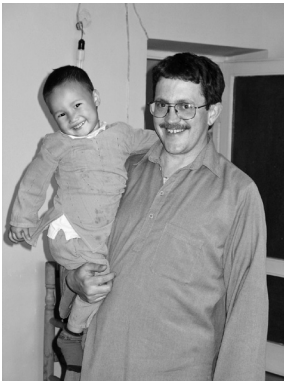
*Del ba del ra  
daara.* (“There  
is a way  
from heart to  
heart.”)

## A day in the life of the finance director

(Steve—Winter 1994)

What a job I have as finance officer for our organization! The economy here runs only on paper money obtained from a black—or is it gray?—market. How can the market run at all when there is no functioning banking system? To “exchange” money for the organization, I often go to a myriad of small shops and negotiate with the dealers over tea for the best rate. I was once in a shop where the owner opened up a simple office safe and pulled out bundles of bills with one hundred thousand dollars in each bundle ... and with multiple additional bundles in the same safe!

The volume of those dollar bundles pales, of course, to the bundles of money received when U.S. dollar bills are exchanged for Afghan currency. The current rate of exchange between the two is about 6,000 *afghanis* per dollar, with the largest afghani bill being “1,000.” We recently took a picture of me appearing very much like a notorious bank robber with a briefcase full of money. Given that the bills were afghani currency, however, the actual value in the briefcase was only worth a few hundred dollars. Anyone wishing to exchange a bundle of 100 hundred-dollar bills should count on returning home with two large suitcases of afghani bills in tow!



Winter of 1994—Steve

Two weeks ago, when we went down toward the center of town to change money, the “market” was closed due to political instability. The moneychangers, though, had surrogates out along the riverbank dealing in the open. We needed some cash to keep our projects operating, so we engaged in negotiations with one of the “bankers.” Suddenly, we heard a shrill whistle—one we’ve grown accustomed to hearing just before the inevitable explosion of a rocket blast. Rocketing of the city has been occurring on a daily basis recently, and many of us hit the ground just as the explosion took place somewhere closer to city center. For the “veterans” in the crowd, somewhat calloused by these regular occurrences, it was a humorous sight to watch. We were then informed that “if you hear the whistle, you are safe;” it is “when you do not hear it that you are in danger”—hardly a comforting word to live with on a daily basis.

Because of these realities, the market is essentially closed down due to the constant danger of rocket attacks. But on one particular day, we

were in desperate need of cash. We had stretched what we had as far as possible, but with salaries coming due and ministry projects continuing to run, we had to find money somewhere. One of our co-workers was told of a friend who knew a friend who knew yet another friend who had local afghani currency in exchange for dollars. So three of us set off in an old office car on that very cold, blustery morning and drove across the city in search of the money.

All went well at the beginning of the day. We arrived at the designated house, entered it, and negotiated a price—though with only one supplier and our high demand, it was a challenge to get a decent rate. We then hauled the load—a duffle bag full of “bricks” of money worth a few cents for each bill—back to the car with full intention of making a quick exit. We climbed into the car, turned on the ignition key ... and the engine refused to start.

One of our men opened the hood and began to tinker with the battery. That attracted first one onlooker on this back street, and then another, until in a few short minutes we had a small crowd gathered around us beginning to express interest not only in the broken-down car, but also in these three foreigners who were not known in the neighborhood. At that point, we decided the most expeditious thing for me to do was to meander down the street with my duffle bag full of money and find a taxi back across the city to the office.

It was not a *bad* idea, but I soon felt like I had gone from the pot into the frying pan as the streets were virtually empty due to the ongoing infighting within the city. I was eventually able to flag down a taxi, but only by finding one that was willing to take on “additional” interested passengers, rather than—as I had hoped—one hired privately for a single passenger at a time.

I squeezed into the taxi and we soon picked up several army officers, also on their way toward the city center. They asked me a few questions and it soon became evident these were not just *any* army officers, but ones who had supported the communist regime prior to its demise. When the men found out I was an American, the atmosphere turned to hostility. They wanted to know “why the American government did *this*” and “why it didn’t do *that*.” I quickly informed them I had noth-

**Afghan Persian  
proverb:**

*Koh ar qadar ke  
beland baasha  
baaz am sare  
khud raa daara.*  
("There is a  
path to the  
top of even  
the highest  
mountain.  
God is more  
powerful than  
any obstacles.")

ing to do with the American government or its embassy and that I was working instead with medical aid projects in the country. This helped to change the atmosphere immediately and by the time we arrived at the city center, the men were inviting me to come with them for a cup of tea. Given my precious cargo, I politely declined. I now hoped I could pass through the remainder of the city without incident. Only a nice thought, however, for my day was just beginning and would turn out to be much more adventuresome than that!

To cross from one side of the city to the other, one has to go through a traffic circle that is Kabul's equivalent to Lebanon's "Green Line" of the 1980s. Some days and with certain ethnic group drivers, this is not a problem. On other days more recently, drivers refuse to go anywhere near the traffic circle if tensions are high between local groups in conflict. Unfortunately, my taxi driver on this day informed me that this was "one of those days" and that he would not budge an inch nearer than the current spot where we were located, nearly a mile away from the circle. Seeing no good alternative and still cognizant that as a foreigner I was a magnet for attention with thousands of dollars in local currency in my bag, I decided my only way forward was to get out and walk, hoping that the co-workers I had left behind would eventually catch up to me.



Vaccinations at Mother Child Health Clinic

Given that every path looked like a disaster waiting to happen, I set out in faith. By moving and being wrapped in a winter coat, I was less conspicuously a foreigner drawing unwanted attention. By moving, however, I drew ever nearer to the traffic circle, and as I did so, I became increasingly aware of the deserted nature of the environment around me. This could only mean, I thought, that the armed group in the circle was at full force in stopping and harassing everyone approaching their sphere of authority. I began to ponder how I would talk my way through the situation.

Travelers approaching the circle pass between two mountains on the edge of the city. It can feel as if one is entering a chute, only to be spewed back into civilization on the other side of the circle. I was

halfway through this chute, perhaps 200 yards from the circle, when I heard a vehicle approaching me from behind. I turned to see that it was not my colleagues coming to my rescue, but instead a Red Cross vehicle speeding hurriedly past me. Just as my heart sank at this last chance of refuge, the brake lights went on and the vehicle backed up. The driver, another foreigner from Italy, told me to get in and, with his immunity, we passed safely through the circle to the other side without so much as a need to reduce speed.

As the driver dropped me off at our office, he informed me what he had done was completely against protocol, but that as he passed me an inner voice told him he needed to stop and help. I suspect he initially had not even known I was a fellow foreigner but had seen a human being walking into a difficult situation. I have dubbed him my Red Cross “angel.”

## **Wishing I could fix everything ... but I can't**

*(Sheryl—March 17, 1994)*

Soriya came back to the clinic today. She is a 27-year-old woman who wanted us to give her medicine for an abortion. She was three months pregnant by her “fiancé” and he left to go to Pakistan and find work. Her whole family had been killed in a rocket attack some years before and she was raised by her aunt. She had earlier come to the clinic, desperate and suicidal, totally helpless. (An unmarried pregnant woman is always blamed, no matter the circumstances, and is sometimes killed by relatives to save the family’s honor.) We had told her we couldn’t help her in that way, and we talked with her, cried and prayed with her, and tried to brainstorm with her a solution.

Today, she came back, looking like a different woman. Her face and body had a lightness to them, and only the dark shadows around her eyes showed the grief of the previous week. She told me happily that “the baby fell.” I asked, “By itself?” ... wondering if God had indeed performed a miracle in her. No, she said, she had sold her gold earrings, maybe one of the few remembrances of her mother, and had gotten an abortion. She continued, “Please examine me, and make sure there are no little arms or legs left ...” I dutifully palpated her soft tummy, empty now.

I had such mixed feelings as I talked with her. I felt grief and sadness for the baby’s death, and yet Soriya was out of the dark pit of despair. I had earlier been afraid she might try to commit suicide, as she told

me that she had in fact tried it before. I am certainly in no position to judge her for the only option that she felt she had. I felt so helpless, with no alternatives to offer her. I couldn't even give her a safe refuge, a place to stay. We are presently living as a family in one room with a houseful of people. Maybe it is my "American-ness" that wishes I could fix things and change situations.

## **"If you sit with us, you will become like us."**

*(Steve—March 1995)*

The past few days have been some of the most difficult we have had in Afghanistan. Yesterday morning, I went to work as usual. As on most nights during the past six months, sniper fire has come into our area of town as a part of the ongoing civil war in the city. Yesterday, the front line between the two warring factions was broken, and fierce battles broke out in the streets just outside our doors.

Many people in our neighborhood literally took to their heels and ran. We stayed and hunkered down wherever we found ourselves at the time. Sheryl was in a medical clinic only three blocks from the office, but neither of us dared stray into the streets. After several hours of fighting, the area was taken over by a different faction and groups of bandits began looting. I had taken refuge with several others in a house next to the office and across the street from our own home.

After the bandits had moved through—or so I thought—I noticed from across the street that the front door of our house was open. Assuming we had been looted, I got permission to go assess the damage. In so doing, I walked in on the group of armed men still in the process of robbing our home. It was a moment that needed a quick prayer

for wisdom. I felt the Lord immediately made it clear to me not to turn my back and leave. The looters had not seen me, but they might have chosen to shoot before asking questions if they now did. I was instead given courage to confront them with a tone of boldness in their local language and with the customary hospitable greetings we had learned while living in Afghanistan. I don't know if they were more shocked or if I was. But after a bit of grumbling, they picked up their automatic weapons, taking a few of our things that they had collected, and shuffled out of the house and down the street.

### **Afghan Persian proverb:**

*Ba maa neshini,  
maa shawi.*

("If you sit with  
us, you will  
become like  
us.")



Last night, unfortunately, proved to be even more challenging. Twice during the night, a group of thieves came into the house where the four of us caught at the office were staying. Threats were made against our lives with demands to come up with money we did not have. Each time the thieves eventually left, but it was a terrifying experience for all of us. We longed for the morning light and were thankful when it eventually came. We feared if they returned a third time, they would resort to greater violence.

Today, I was encouraged by two people speaking into this situation. The first came in the form of a telex we received from a long-term prayer partner in the States who had been given words for us yesterday at the time the events were happening. She passed along to us the words of “instruct, strength, hope, peace and joy.” The “strength” and “hope” I have definitely needed these past 24 hours; the others I will hopefully own in the coming days.

The second word of encouragement today came from an Afghan neighbor and friend who expressed that until these recent events, we had lived alongside them, but were still separate as we always had the opportunity to leave the dangerous situation in which many of them were confined to live. Now that we had suffered an incident in a way similar to many of the Afghan people, he stated, “You have indeed become one of us.”

## Wise counsel from Ali, a true friend and brother

*(Steve—September 1997)*

As the small plane took off on the desert runway into the setting sun, I reflected on all that had transpired in recent weeks.

- Two weeks ago, the city of Mazar erupted once again into violence as several parties vied for power.
- Two weeks before that, the strong man who controlled the city was overthrown and after two days of violence, we were evacuated out of the country to the north with a convoy of United Nations and aid vehicles.
- Shortly after, the city calmed down again and we returned.
- Now, the instability has suddenly returned and we are caught without a land escape route.

Unlike earlier occasions when it was just Sheryl and me making a decision about possible evacuation, we were now the parents of Sara

and were responsible for her as well. We had moved to the relatively peaceful city of Mazar-e-Sharif after Sara's birth in the United States. As we were debating whether we should wait out the current round of unrest, our friend, Ali, came knocking at the door.

I had known Ali for about a year and had visited him regularly in his home. This time he came knocking with concern written on his face. His words still echo in my mind as I sit on the plane and am whisked off once again into an unknown future.

Ali had come to bring us counsel. "I have never given you direct advice," he said. "But this time I feel compelled to do so. My family and I are packing up and leaving while we can get out of the city. We are going to Iran. I may never see you again, but please take your family and leave as the situation is deteriorating, and it is not safe for you to stay." That is the last I ever saw of Ali as he departed from our home, leaving us all with heavy hearts at this sudden turn of events.

Now, two weeks later, Ali's prophetic message is ringing true. After several intense days when every evacuation route has been considered and each one nixed, and with increasing anti-foreign attitudes in the streets, a number of foreigners have been taken "under cover" to the desert dirt military airstrip to be evacuated out of the city. The proper airport for the city is one of the spots where fighting has been taking place, thus making it unsafe and unusable. The feuding parties vying for control of the city have agreed to a ceasefire so that foreign workers, choosing to be evacuated, can do so on planes supplied by an international agency.

At the makeshift airport, it soon became obvious that the two planes provided for evacuation were not nearly large enough for the number of evacuees who had shown up. First preference would be given to women and children, and so Sheryl and Sara—now almost 2 years old—piled onto one of the planes, along with a number of others, and took off for Pakistan. I sat and waited with half a dozen other men for the return of the planes in an estimated three to four hours.

It was not safe for us to return to the city, so we sat under a tree in the baking sun and waited. Hours dragged by and, uncharacteristically, we were not offered tea by the soldiers at the airport, confirming for us the anti-foreign sentiment that had settled over the city. Finally, as the sun approached the western horizon, we heard a plane. It landed, pulled up near to us and, without turning off the propellers, boarded the remaining passengers. The plane taxied down the runway, turned around, and took off in the setting sun. A few minutes later, we were

informed by the air crew that they had been given until sunset to have us out—as sunset would bring an end to the ceasefire.

Ali was one of the few people who ever gave us direct advice. His counsel was offered as a friend, as one who felt like a brother. I am grateful that his words released us, making our decision to leave an easier one. Ali took a physical risk to come and visit us, and it brought closure to our relationship, when so many other relationships have ended for us without proper goodbyes.<sup>2</sup>

## Losing Najib

*(Sheryl—1998)*

Newborn Najib squinted into the bright cold world as he took his first breath. The midwife drew in a small gasp that went unnoticed by the mother. The baby’s mouth made the normal sucking motion, but because of a cleft palate, he was unable to latch on and breastfeed properly.

I met Najib’s mother soon after his birth at the maternity hospital. Najib’s family members were poor refugees from a village outside of the city of Kabul. Because of fighting in their village, they had fled to Kabul for the winter. They were living in a small unheated mud-brick room close to the hospital. Najib’s busy mother was also taking care of several other small children. I visited them several times, encouraging the mother to continue expressing breast milk and spoon-feeding the newborn.

Unfortunately, we didn’t have access to special nipples and bottles for newborns with sucking problems. The last time I knocked on the family’s door, the neighbor woman poked her head out and said that they had gone back to the village. I asked about the baby, and she said he had died. I was shocked that a baby would die simply because of a sucking difficulty. The neighbor said calmly, “Well, thanks be to God, he was such a small baby that the family could bury him quietly without having to make a big expensive funeral for him.”

I walked away, saddened at the poverty, war, and my own stubbornness that had contributed to this dear baby’s death. I had been pushing breastfeeding, while the poor exhausted mother was unable to do all the steps necessary to feed her child with special needs. I could have referred

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<sup>2</sup>Two months later, in November 1998, we moved back to Afghanistan, to the city of Kabul, where security was better than in Mazar-e-Sharif.

Najib to a feeding center in the city, where his mother might have been given formula to feed him. My zeal for breastfeeding had blinded me to the impossibilities of life for this refugee mother.

**Afghan Persian  
proverb:**

*Khaarpushtak  
chuche  
khud-a mega:  
"Bakhmali  
bachem"*  
(Literally: "A  
porcupine  
speaking to  
its baby says,  
'Oh, my child  
of velvet."  
Meaning:  
"A mother's  
own child  
is especially  
beautiful to  
her.")

## **Women unite ... under the radar**

*(Sheryl—April 1999)*

It is getting to be more and more difficult to live and work here in Afghanistan. The present regime continues to tighten restrictions. Afghan women are not supposed to go to foreigners' homes or to work for any foreign nongovernmental organization (NGO). I can't have a female house helper and the neighbors don't come to visit. I am able to get out and go places, but fewer and fewer Afghan women are on the streets.

I do love the days I go to the clinic and work with the traditional birth attendants group. It seems so natural to chat and drink tea and work on health lessons. I hardly see any other Afghan women the rest of the week. We have decided, however, to finish the bed net project. It is too dangerous for the women to make deliveries to the office, so we have split up the group into several smaller groups of women going to different places. Hopefully, this won't draw attention to them.

The women receive the raw materials from me and then do the sewing at home. Every other week—we regularly change the day and time to avoid being noticed—the women come and deliver the finished nets, get paid, and take more materials. We take the opportunity then to chat and drink tea, as social occasions are rare for women these days. Our little Micah is attracting a lot of attention; the

women think he is a beautiful baby. He has dark brown eyes and lots of thick dark hair and could really pass for an Afghan baby.

## **On medicine and the mullah**

*(Sheryl—May 1999)*

I am still learning so much about this culture. One day as a group of us were chatting, one woman raised the concern that her son was sick with "zardi" (yellowness). I commented, "There really is no medical treatment necessary for hepatitis. Just make sure your son gets lots of

rest and fluids, and if you are still concerned, bring him to the clinic to be examined.” Another woman spoke up, “Oh, I know of a *mullah* who can pray for your son and cast out the spirit of ‘zardi.’” As the women left together, they were making plans to visit the mullah.

## Torn between our “passport” country and our “host” country

*(Steve—September 2001/USA)*

Life has been coming at us almost too fast to handle the last couple of months. Elizabeth was born in July here in the United States, and we seem to have finally understood how to process the paperwork in order to return as soon as possible to Afghanistan.

On the morning of September 11, slightly less than eight weeks since Elizabeth’s birth, I was driving to the travel agency to pick up our airline tickets for our return flight. On the way, I turned on the radio and caught a reporter from downtown New York City announcing that a plane had crashed into one of the city’s Twin Towers. As the newsman continued his reporting, a second plane hit the second tower. I knew immediately this was a terrorist attack and who was behind it.

My heart sank as I drove more slowly, stopping in town to pick up a few items on my way to the travel agency. In the first store I visited, I saw footage of the planes. Suddenly, I knew that our flight, scheduled for departure only a few days hence, was not going to happen. Our

personal world was being cataclysmically turned upside down right before my eyes. We had known for some time of murderous threats coming out of Afghanistan. But the audacity of the attack still took us by surprise.

Today in church, we had the opportunity to share as a congregation the raw emotions that everyone was feeling. For us, though, it is perhaps more raw than for most. While many in the society around us burn with anger and seek revenge for what has happened, we are torn by both the violence that has happened in our “passport country,” as well as the violence that is projected and will undoubtedly be coming to our “host country.”



Our favorite mode of transport in Kabul (2004)

What about all the people we have come to know in Afghanistan, we wonder, who have nothing to do with the 9/11 events happening here? The Afghan people have suffered for years under the oppression of war and injustice in their country. Now they will suffer even more violence due to the actions of individuals—many of whom are not even Afghan—who currently reside in their country uninvited by the Afghan people. What choice do Afghans have in all of this other than to accept more fear and suffering?

We cry out for those who have lost loved ones here, as well as for those who have lost and will lose loved ones there. Where is justice, we ask? It is easy to want to lash out at those we do not know. But how much, if anything, do Americans know of the suffering of the Afghan people? Will we ever be able to return to Afghanistan, we wonder, and find out what has happened to our co-workers and friends?

I was grateful today that our congregation was open to letting us express our deepest feelings about these matters. The brothers and sisters there were truly the face of Christ to us in this difficult time.

**Afghan Persian  
proverb:**

*Dewaalaa  
mush daara,  
musha gosh.*

(Literally:  
“Walls have  
mice and mice  
have ears.”

Meaning:  
“Be careful  
what you say,  
as you never  
know who is  
listening.”)

## Reflections on the Afghan Muslims I know

(Sheryl—September 11, 2001)

The Afghan Muslims I know are hardworking, hospitable and respectful. They hate neither “Am-rika” nor Christians.

*Kaka-jan* (“uncle”). I can see Kaka-jan, a quiet, grandfatherly man who worked in our home, cooking and cleaning. He loved Sara and Micah, and asked them, “*Chai mekbori?*” (“Do you want to drink tea?”) He would then prepare them warm, sweet milky tea.

When Micah started making sounds at 18 months of age, saying “da, da, da, da,” Kaka-jan would encourage him: “da, yaz-da, duwaz-da (10, 11, 12).” Here *we* thought Micah was trying to say “Dada!”

Kaka-jan learned to build with duplos and occasionally entertained Sara and Micah while I ran errands. Kaka-jan was as gentle and kind with our children as were their own grandparents. After we found and killed several scorpions in our home, Kaka-jan wanted to bring us a special brick

from a shrine in his village that is thought to have magical powers to keep scorpions out. We kindly thanked him and said we would pray to Jesus for protection of our children.

*Our language teacher.* Our language teacher was a distinguished, highly educated Pashtun man. He was very proper, and wanting to be respectful to us as foreigners, spoke with us in a high, formal Persian Dari. We just stared at him dumbly. Finally, we interrupted him politely, “Excuse us, dear teacher, please speak to us as you do to your young children. We don’t understand formal Dari!” From that day on, we started learning the language and became friends with him and his family.

We heard how he had spoken out against the former government and how he was imprisoned during that regime. His middle daughter was born during his imprisonment, and they named her “Memory”—as they did not know if he would ever be released. Following his prison term, our teacher was extremely careful with his speech, though he would sometimes tell us in hushed tones his true feelings about the government.

## “Their security is in God”

(Steve—Late 2002)

The Muslim fasting month of Ramadan has just ended. This is our first year back in Kabul after the fall of the previous regime by American and other international forces in coalition with the Afghan army. Unlike past years when neighbors feared that our visits might draw unwanted attention to themselves, we have been readily invited back into their homes again. Today, we visited our neighbors across the street. For the last several years, we had visited neighbors clandestinely during these *Eid* (festive) holidays, but today we did so openly.

For most of the decade since our arrival in Afghanistan in 1991, we have been some of the few foreigners living in the country. But this year, the numbers of foreigners exploded, with literally thousands of aid workers, private contractors, foreign government agency workers, and numerous diplomats now in town. Furthermore, much of the physical security of these entities in the city is today being aided by international security forces. Most foreign entities are guarded by security personnel brandishing automatic weapons, and those working for them live with a fortress mentality behind secured walls and barriers.

**Afghan Persian  
proverb:**

*Yak amsaaya  
pesh az yak  
hazaar khash.*  
 (“A good  
neighbor is  
better than  
a thousand  
relatives.”)

Our quiet neighborhood continues to be an anomaly as we live post-9/11 in much the same way as we have for many years—similar to our neighbors in simple walled compounds. During a recent visit to the home of one of our neighbors, a relative of his stopped by to visit. The neighbor began to tell his relative who we were. The relative looked at us and with amazement in his voice inquired, “I just came in off the street. I did not see any fortified walls or armed guards. These people don’t have weapons or bodyguards with them. Where is their security?” Our neighbor, without missing a beat, replied, “Their security is in God!”

## The tale of two girls, Sima and Elizabeth

*(Sheryl and Steve—2004)*

*Kabul, Afghanistan (January 1993).* Kabul in early 1993 was not a good time or place to be born. The city had erupted into a battlefield. The bullets and rockets screaming overhead drove many Kabulis from their homes. Yet in the midst of fear and death, new life was born.

Sima was greeted warmly into the loving arms of her mother, father, and three older siblings. Little did she know that just as she was entering this world, her world would be falling apart. When Sima was barely 40 days old, a rocket hit the family home and Sima’s parents were tragically killed. She was spared, along with her sister and two brothers, and they were subsequently raised by their grandparents.

The children moved with their grandparents from one destroyed neighborhood to another, surviving on the day labor jobs of the grandfather. “Baba” would go out every morning and squat by the market road with his shovel, hoping that someone would hire him to work for the day. On good days, the family ate bread, rice and vegetables in the evening, and on other days, they went to bed hungry.

Sima had no mother to breastfeed her and she grew up weak and sickly, despite the extended family’s attempt to care for her the best they could. She started getting ear infections several years later and often woke up at night, crying in pain. Her grandparents barely had enough money to feed the children, so medical care was definitely out of the question. The grandparents would thus cradle Sima at night and rock her until she returned to a fitful sleep. Years went by as one ear infection after another led to a chronic otitis media, which infected her ear bone. Sima’s ear gave off such an odor that anyone close to her reacted by wrinkling up their nose.



The children grew and learned carpet weaving, a skill done well by nimble little fingers. The world around them also changed, from the Mujahideen to the Taliban. With this, the rocketing stopped and their lives became more peaceful, though still poor. Then tragedy struck again for the orphans, as first their grandmother, and then their elderly grandfather, died. The children were left penniless and without any other family members. They were determined, however, to stay together.

Again, survival instincts and the benevolence of their neighbors pulled them through. They started weaving carpets in their home. Soon afterward, a new government came to power, and for the first time in her life, Sima went to school. Her ear infection never cleared up, so she walked to school with her head low, hoping no one would sit close to her and tease her about the smell.



School girls in Mazar-e-Sharif

*United States (July 2001).* Elizabeth was born in one of the wealthiest nations on earth and in one of the best specialized maternity hospitals anywhere to be found. Her world was peaceful and intact. Her family loved and cuddled her. But on September 11, 2001, soon after she was born, the world around her fell apart. Her life and family were, however, safe and secure. She was oblivious to changes around her as grown-ups talked and worried. When she was ill, her parents got excellent medical care for her. She grew into a strong, healthy little girl. After seven months, her parents returned with her and her two older siblings to their home and work in Afghanistan.

Until this time, Sima and Elizabeth's lives ran down separate paths, as different as the two cultures into which they were born. But soon after Elizabeth arrived in Kabul in 2002, their paths began intersecting. Neighbors of Sima, now 10 years old, told Elizabeth's mother about the orphan children in an attempt to obtain medical care and relief aid for them. However, even foreign doctors were unable to properly diagnose Sima's ear problem due to equipment limitations.

One evening, Elizabeth, 3 years old at the time, was joyously waving to her father at the front door, welcoming him home from work. The door she was leaning on broke at the bottom hinge. She stepped

backward, falling with a thud off the porch onto the concrete three feet below her and injuring her head. She was quickly gathered into her parents' arms. Within minutes she had blood oozing from her ear and was quickly taken to the best medical facility in Kabul. German doctors treated her and she was fine in a few days' time.

Her injury, however, provided a further intersection in the lives of Elizabeth and Sima. On a follow-up visit for medical care, Sima was able to go along and see the German doctor who had treated Elizabeth, and he was able (finally!) to diagnose her ear problem. The proper diagnosis brought disappointing news, however, in that her condition—an infection close to the brain—was untreatable in Kabul and, left untreated, was potentially fatal.

In the weeks that followed, Sima got the chance of a lifetime through a series of miracles and answers to prayer. The first miracle had come through her chance to see the German specialist at the restricted foreign military hospital. Then, through an introductory letter prepared by the doctor, she was seen and accepted by a German organization who takes Afghan children to Germany for medical treatment not available in Afghanistan.

Just after Valentine's Day, on February 14, a very scary but exhilarating day arrived for Sima. She was sent off with love by her siblings to receive some of the best medical treatment in the world. Sima returned to Afghanistan six months later, after several surgeries, healed and restored to health.

## Moving from suspicion to trust and friendship

*(Steve—Spring 2006)*

Today, we completed a daylong seminar with Afghanistan's Ministry of Economy—an important encounter that came about as a follow-up to an earlier conversation taking place between the Ministry and one of our senior staff members. There has been considerable skepticism on the part of government officials in this post-9/11 era as to the activities of the mushrooming numbers of foreign agencies at work in the city of Kabul. While in selective cases, the cynicism is no doubt justified, it is also true that a few bad apples in the batch have made people unduly critical and suspicious of *all* aid assistance.

In reaction to the unscrupulous activities of a few foreign agencies, many new regulations have been introduced by the government in recent months. One such regulation was based on the assumption that all foreign entities secured their funds through contracts—and particu-

larly contracts with large donors or governments. So agencies like our own are being called into the Ministry of Economy to present the “legal financial contracts” for the projects we run.

This is a challenge for our agency since a significant amount of our funding comes through religious benevolence. When our senior Afghan staff person was called in before the Ministry, he graciously described the agency’s long-standing work in the country and how we were foreign Christians who received money—much in the same way that Muslims give alms to charities—for projects directly benefiting people in need. The officials were amazed, that while many of the “Christian” nations from which we came were sending military personnel into their country, that other Christians were choosing to express love to their people through service and monetary resources used instead to help the poor. Here was an agency, they said, that they could understand, though it did challenge the stereotypical view they had of what aid agencies generally do.

As part of the dialogue that opened up from these conversations, we assured them that we had regular audits done of our accounting books and that they were welcome to have access to the report. They responded that few within their department understood what audits were all about, but that this sounded like something they could use to give more confidence to them in understanding the work of agencies. We offered to conduct a one-day seminar for their staff during the upcoming visit of our auditor and, today, we were able to hold that seminar. The Ministry staff seemed much appreciative of the information we provided and, consequently, a potential adversary has now become a friend.

## My peace story

(*Sara Martin*—2007)<sup>3</sup>

Little Raima opened her eyes and whimpered. She couldn’t understand what had just happened. One moment she had been having a good dream; the next moment there was a sharp pain in her head. And she

### Afghan Persian proverb:

*Baar-e kaj  
ba manzel  
na-merasa.*  
(Literally: “An over-packed, tilted load won’t reach its destination.”  
Meaning: “Honesty is the best policy.”)

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<sup>3</sup> Sara is Steve and Sheryl Martin’s daughter, their eldest child. She was 11 years of age at the time of this writing.

could barely breathe. Her cries grew louder, and after what seemed like years—but had really only been a few minutes—a strange man picked her up from the rubble.

Well, this wasn't what she had expected and she began wailing louder than ever for her mother and father. The man took her on a bus. The trip was long and very bumpy, but finally she fell asleep, leaning on the strange man. Then the man handed her over to a woman. Was it her mother? Raima couldn't tell, so she just snuggled up against the woman. At least the stranger was now a woman, not a man.

"Who is this child? Where are her parents?" the doctors asked the strange man. "I don't know. All I know is that she was buried under a pile of rubble from a building bombed last night. She appeared to be the

only living one of her family. I thought it wasn't fair for her to die, and since she was so small I brought her here." After that, the man left, never to be seen again.

"I'm Shirin-jan," the lady told little Raima. "What's your name?"

So this woman *wasn't* her mother. She started to whimper, then whispered, "I'm Raima."

"Raima, I'm going to take care of you until we find someone from your family. It is a little squashed here, but you need help for your bruised head."

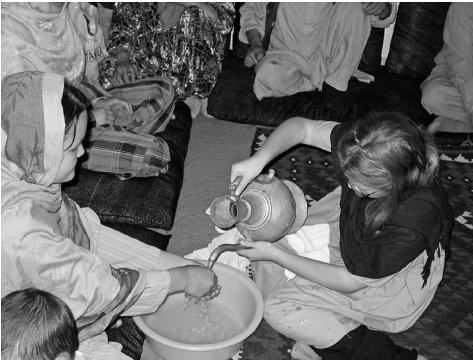
Raima nodded, before falling asleep.

Raima stayed at the hospital for a few days, sleeping in a bed with two others. One day, Shirin-jan came to Raima with two other people.

"Raima, this is Sheryl-jan and Sara-jan. I'm going to take you to my home after they are finished visiting you. OK?"

Raima nodded. Sara-jan, the girl, gave her a little stuffed cat. She had never seen a stuffed animal before, but it looked like the cats she would see on the streets at home. That made her think of her parents and she started to cry.

Shirin-jan brought Raima to her house and took care of her. One day, her uncle came for her and took her back to their village. Apparently, her mother had survived, although she lost both her legs. I hope that today they live happily together and that life will not be too hard for



Sara serves guests.

them. Unfortunately, though, in Afghanistan, this would be very hard, as a wife with no legs would mean little to a man. Therefore, Raima's mother may never remarry, and work is hard for women to find. Keep little Raima and her mother in your thoughts and prayers.

## Giving and receiving: The two go hand in hand (Sheryl—May 2007)

It's been a long time since that September day in 1991 when we met our first neighbors in Kabul. I chuckle now when I remember how ignorant we were of the culture and how eagerly we went to their house. We have learned so much from living here over many years. The Afghan people have taught us wonderful gifts of hospitality and survival in difficult circumstances.

As we are finishing our time here in Afghanistan, we invited Hussein and Gul-jan over today for dinner. One of my disappointments during our time here is how hard it has been to connect with Afghan families. Traditionally, men and women have separate social lives. I know many women with whom I drink tea and chat and visit. Steve, too, has some Afghan male friends. But there are few families that we have connected with as a family. But we have known Hussein and Gul-jan and their children for many years, and our children have had good interactions together.

After enjoying Qabuli pilau and meatballs together on this afternoon, we settled back on cushions to drink tea. Our children played UNO and duplos together. Another expatriate friend joined our company. It was a relaxing, ordinary afternoon.

Later, our expatriate friend, a relative newcomer to Afghanistan, told us how much he enjoyed the day. He said, "The best part was the example of Jesus' love you all showed to that Afghan family. Each member of your family was involved in serving them and me! I was touched and challenged by your demonstration of servanthood."

As we went to Afghanistan to serve the Afghan people and be a peaceable witness to them, we left with the experience of receiving and learning as much as we had given. The privilege of living and working among the Afghan people will stay with us forever.

### Afghan Persian proverb:

*Aanchi delam  
khaast na aan  
shud; aanchi  
khudaa khaast  
amaan shud.*  
("What my  
heart desired  
didn't happen;  
instead, what  
God wanted  
was really  
done.")

## God's work goes on ...

(Steve and Sheryl—2012)

*Diakonia*—the Greek word for service in the name of Jesus' love—continues to challenge us five years after returning to our “passport” country. The door for such service in Afghanistan remains cracked open. In the New Testament book of Hebrews, we read of the “great cloud of witnesses” that surrounds us. As we reflect on Afghanistan, we recall that cloud in the names of friends and colleagues who have given their lives in Afghanistan—names such as Richard, Carol, Herb, Tom, Dan and Al—all of whom were great influences in our call of service and who have now been welcomed home by Jesus.

Accidents, illness and violence have caused these witnesses to cross from this life to the next. Others we worked with have returned to their home countries, many serving in other locations around the world. Still others remain in Jesus' love as the door for such service continues in Afghanistan despite continuing obstacles. Our story has mixed with their stories, and the story of the generation that follows us is mixing with ours. Such is the tapestry of *diakonia* in Afghanistan and around the world.

## Never say “Amen”

(Sara Martin—2012)<sup>4</sup>

It happened on a day in early August. It was one of the hotter dog days of summer—the land dry, the heat blistering, and the days long. The food on my fork was beginning to make its long, lonely journey to my mouth when the fork's momentum jerked and stopped just as I glanced at the early morning news on TV. What I saw was heart-stopping: In a seemingly unimportant land called Afghanistan, a woman, blond-haired, in her late 20s, stood outside what could have easily been my old house. When I saw the mountains behind the house, I thought, “Those mountains ... they are the ones I grew up seeing every day. That mountain is mine. It's a part of me.”

Once I got past the initial shock of seeing my old neighborhood, I focused on what the reporter was saying: “Ten Americans taken hostage. At least two killed.” The whole room blared the words. I wanted to look away but couldn't. The TV pulled me in until it seemed like it

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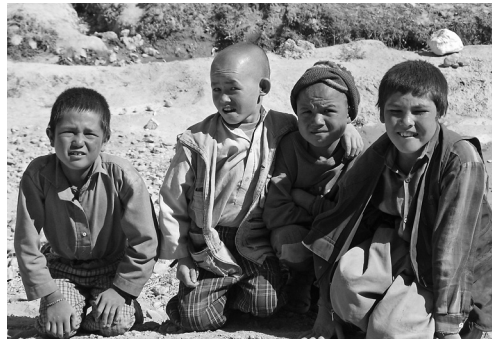
<sup>4</sup> This essay was first written in 2010 by Sara Martin, Steve and Sheryl's daughter, at age 15. In 2011, she won a gold key from the Scholastic Writing Awards and the Lancaster (Pa.) Public Library for the essay.

was just me and the TV in this world. Time stood still. The enormity of this shocking news punched me in the stomach. Often I hear about soldiers being killed by suicide bombers in Afghanistan, but I usually seem able to dismiss news like that fairly quickly. On this day, however, intuition told me that these murders would change my life forever. I knew it. I just somehow knew it. These people who were killed were my acquaintances, family friends, and even adopted grandparents.<sup>5</sup>

My parents confirmed my intuitive feeling later that day. I knew only two of the 10 people who died: Tom and Dan. Quiet and gentle-hearted, Tom—the husband of my third-grade teacher—cared endless hours for the Afghan people. And Dan, who was one of the people I didn't really know personally, was always around when I was little.

Two months later, I sat in the middle of a gathering that was reminiscent of times long ago. We had cried all our tears at a memorial service earlier that afternoon for Tom. A memorial service that felt, to me at least, more like a celebration—a celebration that our friends had left this bus stop called life and were ready to start living with Jesus. The people at this particular gathering were some of those who had served in Afghanistan with us. Growing up without extended family members nearby had caused these people to become grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins to me.

Playing games and eating both fudge brownie and mint chocolate chip ice cream, we kids sat on the floor. It was too hot in the house we were in. There were at least two cats wandering around. This caused my brother, Micah, to sneeze about a bazillion times, giving us all an unwanted shower, seeing as he's allergic to cats. I got bored with the games and meandered over to where there were some photo albums lying on a coffee table. I picked up one with a faux brown leather cover entitled "Pakistan '95-'98." Hoping to find a picture of myself, I started to page through the album. My third birthday was in Pakistan, but apparently



Boys in Bamiyan

<sup>5</sup> For more on the details of this tragic massacre, see Jonathon P. Larson, *Making Friends among the Taliban: A Peacemaker's Journey in Afghanistan* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2012), particularly chapter 7. See also the documentary, *Weaving Life*, on one of those who died—peacemaker and aid worker, Dan Terry. Available at [www.MennoMedia.org/WeavingLife](http://www.MennoMedia.org/WeavingLife).

I had gotten the wrong album. I didn't find any pictures of me. There were lots of really cute ones, though—Asian kids smiling shyly, women hiding their faces behind black headscarves, and old grandpa-like men showing off their toothless grins.

One of the cats must've gotten tired of tormenting my brother because she walked over toward me. I put down the album and started petting her. She wasn't a beautiful kitty, but was feather-soft and had a sweet temperament. Nothing at all like my cousins' cat who bites and scratches kids all the time. Black and gray, her stripes reminded me of Tigger in *Winnie the Pooh*. Listening to conversations unfurling around me, I was perfectly content sitting there with that cat. I squeezed the cat to me, remembering past suppers I had spent with these same people.

Our dining room table was covered with an embroidered tablecloth and set with handmade blue glass cups from Herat, Afghanistan's cultural capital. I remember in earlier years sitting at the table as long as I could, eavesdropping on the adults' conversations. I heard many amusing, yet sad stories that way. I heard about the man who got mauled by a bull and the pregnant woman who rode for days on a donkey to get to a medical clinic, just to be told her child would never live. I heard stories about lions in Africa, Taliban members trying to rob my parents, and many tales of God's goodness in a land some would call God-forsaken.

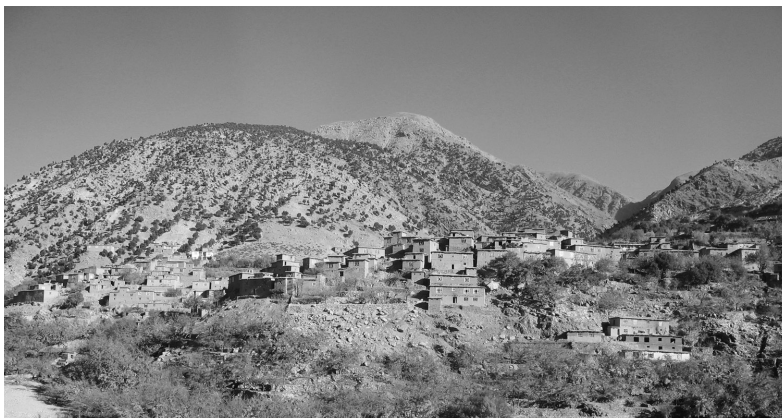
After dessert, I would move from the table to a *toshak*<sup>6</sup> behind the wood heater. There I would sit drowsily reading a book by a solar-powered light, since we didn't have electricity, or listen to more stories of a risky life in the farthest reaches of the country.

The conversation this Saturday night, however, was no longer about life in the farthest reaches of Afghanistan. Instead, it was about forgiving the men, be they Taliban or other, who killed Tom and Dan on that day in early August. Someone mentioned that we should have prayer before going our separate ways once again, so we all crowded into the sitting room like Asian people packed shoulder-to-shoulder on a bus. The adults swapped prayer requests back and forth for a while. Then we started a group prayer. All of a sudden, I felt 4 years old again, lying on the floor next to a wood stove with warmth creeping into every hidden place in my soul. I was a child again, held in my Father's arms, close to His heart. There was the unmistakable feeling of a greater Presence in the room.

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<sup>6</sup> A *toshak* is the Afghan version of a couch. It is a long pillow on the floor with smaller pillows set against the wall as backrests.





Afghan mountain village

Fears and worries melted away as quickly as snow in the spring. Walls around my heart fell down. I let myself be loved and lifted up by Jesus.

Earlier that day, a speaker at the memorial service said that although Tom and Dan completed the work God had given them on the day they died, they hadn't made it back home. I now had an impulse to just cry out and thank God that they *had* made it home. They never had a *real* home on this earth. Now they are finally and truly home in heaven. Being the cautious, shy child I am, I did not act on that impulse. But in my heart I just had to ask God to please let others understand as well that heaven was Tom and Dan's true home.

Rachel, a college-aged girl sitting behind me on a chair, reached down to where I sat on the floor and squeezed my shoulder. I wonder if she knew how I felt at that moment. Feelings of love, confidence and freedom swelled within my being. I could do anything, be anything once again, just like when little kids think they can grow up to be Superman.

"Never say 'Amen,'" I started to plead in my heart. "Please, God, never let us say 'Amen.'" The closing prayer was being said, but still I pleaded, "Never say 'Amen.'" "Amen" was uttered, of course; we all hugged, and slowly our circle dissipated. Just the same, I hope I see these people, my "extended family," many more times before heaven. I hope we never have to say "Amen" again. But even if we do—and even if I never see these people this side of heaven—I am still thankful that Jesus gave me that gathering as a reminder that everything about my life in Afghanistan is not dead, even though it may seem that way.

# Afghanistan: Historical timeline

## Throughout the centuries

- |                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| <b>2000–1500 BC</b> | Aryan tribes rule; city of Kabul established.   |
| <b>600 BC</b>       | Zoroastrianism makes inroads into Afghanistan.  |
| <b>522–486 BC</b>   | Darius the Great expands Persian Empire throughout region; plagued by tribal revolts around Kandahar.   |
| <b>329–326 BC</b>   | Alexander the Great conquers area, but faces constant revolts and fails to subdue people.   |
| <b>400 AD</b>       | Invasion of the White Huns, who destroy Buddhist culture.   |
| <b>652 AD</b>       | Arabs introduce Islam.  |
| <b>1219–1221 AD</b> | Genghis Khan invades; destroys irrigation systems, turning fertile soil into permanent deserts.   |
| <b>1273 AD</b>      | Marco Polo crosses northern Afghanistan.  |
| <b>1504–1519 AD</b> | Moghul dynasty established.   |
| <b>1747 AD</b>      | Modern-day Afghanistan established.   |
| <b>1839–1842 AD</b> | First Anglo-Afghan war; ends in humiliating defeat for the British.   |
| <b>1859 AD</b>      | Durand line fixes borders of Afghanistan and British India, splitting Afghan tribal areas and leaving half of them in what is today Pakistan. |
| <b>1878 AD</b>      | Second Anglo-Afghan war; strong resistance immediately established.   |
| <b>1921 AD</b>      | Third Anglo-Afghan war; British again defeated. Afghanistan gains full control of foreign affairs.  |
| <b>1933–1973 AD</b> | King Zahir Shah rules Afghanistan.  |
| <b>1934 AD</b>      | U.S. recognizes Afghanistan as a sovereign state.   |
| <b>1959 AD</b>      | Women enter workplace.  |

## More recent events

- July 1973** Afghan communists overthrow King Zahir Shah; beginning of current era of conflict.
- 1978** Mujahideen—freedom fighters—established to resist communist rule.
- December 1979** Soviet invasion to prop up communist government.
- 1988–Feb. 1989** Soviet Union defeated/withdrawal.
- April 1992** Mujahideen overthrow communist government, establish interim government.
- August 1992** Full-scale civil war breaks out between Mujahideen groups.
- Late 1994** Taliban established near Kandahar in response to civil war.
- September 1996** Taliban take control of Kabul.
- August 1998** U.S. sends in cruise missiles targeting Osama bin Laden and training camps.
- March 2001** Taliban destroy Bamiyan Buddhas.
- September 2001** New York twin towers attack.
- October 2001** International troops/Afghan resistance attack Taliban strongholds.
- November 2001** Kabul falls from Taliban control.
- October 2004** Presidential elections; Hamid Karzai elected.
- September 2005** Parliamentary elections held.
- 2006** American embassy reopened after 1979 shutdown at killing of ambassador.
- 2010** U.S. troop surge.
- 2011** Osama Bin Laden killed in raid initiated from Jalalabad.
- 2014** Timeline for U.S. troop withdrawal.

# Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What most struck you about the experiences recounted by the Martins in this booklet? What story left the deepest impression on you?
2. Which of the following words best describes for you the choice the Martins made to raise a family in Afghanistan: courageous, risky, faithful, irresponsible, commendable, other?
3. The Martins refer often to Afghan proverbs in their writing. How do these cast further light on life in Afghanistan and the Martins' ministry there?
  - "There is a way from heart to heart."
  - "If you sit with us, you will become like us."
  - "Walls have mice and mice have ears."
  - "A good neighbor is better than a thousand relatives."
  - "What my heart desired didn't happen; instead, what God wanted was really done."
4. The Martins write here of considerable poverty, war, helplessness and despair. Yet, in the midst of these conditions, they highlight "glimmers of hope." Which of these "glimmers" stand out most to you in their story?
5. The Martins describe their feelings on 9/11 as being "torn between our 'passport' country and our 'host' country?" What do they mean by this? Have you ever had a similar experience? Did you find it normal, embarrassing, understandable, disturbing, or unpatriotic to have such feelings?
6. What do you think should be the role of the church in places where Christian witness is highly restricted or forbidden altogether? Is it best to be a quiet presence? To work clandestinely around government regulations? Or to simply stay away from such places altogether?
7. John Lapp states in the Foreword that "the Martins tried to be where God was at work in Afghanistan, seeking to do their part in bringing healing and hope in this challenging context" (page 2). In what way does this differ from the calling of all followers of Jesus? How does this translate in the place where you and your congregation are situated?

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- No. 20 Matthew Krabill and David Stutzman, editors, *New Anabaptist Voices* (2012).\*
- No. 21 Steve and Sheryl Martin, *For God so Loved Afghanistan: Journal Selections from 16 Years of Family Living in a War-torn Land.* (2013).\*

\* Available in Spanish.

# For God so loved Afghanistan

## Journal selections from 16 years of family living in a war-torn land

Steve and Sheryl Martin

As young adults, Steve and Sheryl Martin developed a sense of call to serve God internationally. Through convictions partially developed during the Gulf War of 1991, they became convinced of the importance of a peaceable witness in that part of the world.

Sheryl and Steve served in Afghanistan with Mennonite Mission Network and one of its predecessor agencies over a period of 16 years, from September 1991 through June 2007. They were based in Kabul except for two stays in Mazar-e-Sharif for security reasons (1992 and 1996-1997) and two home leaves in the United States (1995 and 2001).

Steve worked in the finance department for an international nongovernmental organization, becoming finance director in 1997. Sheryl served primarily in nursing, much of the time in maternal-child health. She also worked occasionally with community health and eye care.

The Martins' three children—Sara (1995), Micah (1998) and Elizabeth (2001)—joined them in their vision in service to the Afghan people. As part of a larger international team, they had many interactions with different cultures and attended a small English-language international school.



*Steve and Sheryl Martin currently live in Lancaster County, Pa. Steve is finance director for Eastern Mennonite Missions. Sheryl works part-time as an RN consultant for Friendship Community. Their children attend Ephrata area public schools.*

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