

A Conversation with Suraya Sadeed

Q: What was the writing process like for you? Did you continue to travel in Afghanistan while you wrote? How did you decide where to end the story when your work keeps building every day?

Well, I'd never met my English co-author prior to sitting down to write the book with him. He lives with his family in Ireland, on the extreme west coast of the country, and I had to travel there to work with him. It was truly in the midst of nowhere, overlooking the storm-swept Atlantic oceans—we had zero distractions and could only write! We actually hit it off right from the get-go; we laughed so much during the writing process, had some very spirited arguments, and also had some moments of quiet, tears, and sadness.

I felt it was important in my book to chronicle the past few decades of developments in Afghanistan, which I witnessed firsthand, to better understand where we are today in the country. I think the end of the book relates most closely to where we are now in terms of the international debate over military action and engagement in Afghanistan; the point I wanted to end on was that only by education can we heal the wounds of the Afghan people and usher in a new generation who will not see aggression and war as the only option for dealing with the nation's problems. We move forward with our ongoing struggle to resist the blind prejudice of extremists in Afghanistan and to keep educating young boys and girls in the ways

of the world and on peaceful solutions that will continue. I believe that is the key to rebuilding the country.

Q: How often do you currently travel to Afghanistan on aid missions? What changes have you seen in Afghanistan since the end of this book's narrative, in 2006? What kinds of developments have you made in your aid and education work since you wrote the Afterword for this book?

I continue to travel three to four times a year to different regions of Afghanistan to oversee the implementation of our innovative programs, such as peace education, computer literacy, environmental education, and land mine awareness; they benefit an estimated 100,000 students around the country. The most significant progress was in the implementation of the peace education program in twenty-two schools in Kandahar Province, the birthplace of the Taliban, where the security situation is fragile and unpredictable. The beneficiaries were an estimated 36,000 students. Another major development was that we finally received the blessing of Afghanistan's Ministry of Education to develop an integrated, nationwide peace education curriculum for Afghan students. I believe that this program, which incorporates conflict resolution, reconciliation, and peace messages into textbooks, can have a profound positive impact on the lives of approximately six million students, families, and communities in Afghanistan.

The progress report on Afghanistan is not as rosy as we hope to see. The security situation is still a major concern, and people are not as optimistic as they were a few years ago.

Q: Did you have any security fears regarding the publishing of this book? What kinds of precautions did you take, if any, in order to avoid compromising your aid work?

Well, I changed a few of the names of people in the book—those who I felt might face danger or retaliations if they were exposed in the book as having helped us with our mission, or as having gone against the Taliban and other extremist elements in the country. Other than that, I've told the story as it is, because I believe it embodies a crucial set of messages for Afghanistan, and for the international community engaged in that country.

Q: What news sources do you recommend Americans turn to for the most accurate, up-to-date news on Afghanistan?

That is a difficult question since we all have our own biases. I watch CNN, BBC, Al-Jazeera, and a couple of Afghanistan-based channels to compare the accuracy of the news.

Q: In addition to donating to Help the Afghan Children, what are some concrete ways that people can make a difference in the ongoing humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan?

People can make a difference by empowering and supporting indigenous organizations that provide cost-effective vital services such as basic health care, education, building roads and bridges, vocational training, income-generating programs, and capacity building. It is important to make sure that the organizations have track records, experience, dedication and knowledge of the land, and, above all, transparency in their work.